THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON

AS A LITERARY CRITIC

by
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CHAPTER I

The Need for Re-evaluation

During his lifetime Thomas Wentworth Higginson was regarded with great respect, not only as a courageous humanitarian, but also as a literary artist and critic. Although his active participation in the abolition movement, the Civil War, and the campaign for women's rights contributed greatly to his reputation, he was also widely known as an able man of letters. In April, 1862, the same month that his advice on the importance of style and the need for literary apprenticeship appeared in the Atlantic,[1] Emily Dickinson wrote to him, asking "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?"[2] Thus even before he settled down to a literary career at Newport and Cambridge, his reputation was great enough to attract attention of the quiet poet at Amherst. Moses Coit Tyler while a professor at Michigan had also taken notice of Higginson. Just after the Civil War, Tyler described the Colonel as he introduced him to a class in English literature as the "best living writer of the English language."[3] The Reverend O.B. Frothingham was likewise impressed. He recognized Higginson as a "true artist in letters."[4]

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[1] "A Letter to a Young Contributor," reprinted in Atlantic Essays (Boston, 1871), pp. 71-92.

[2] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises (Boston, 1909), p. 249.

[3] Mary Thacher Higginson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life (Boston, 1914), p. 264.

[4] O.B. Frothingham, Transcendentalism in New England, a History (New York, 1880), p. 361.

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Such generous praise was characteristic of contemporary opinion. William Dean Howells said Higginson was "an essayist in a certain sort without rival among us,"[5] and ranked him with such prominent figures as Lowell and Emerson:

> To say Prescott, Motley, Parkman, Lowell, Norton, Higginson, Dana, Emerson, Channing, was to say patrician, in the truest and often the best sense, if not the largest. Boston was small, but these were her first citizens... .[6]

We learn from Mrs. Millicent Todd Bingham that her mother, Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd, shared this contemporary respect for Higginson. "My trust in your judgment, taste, and friendliness are boundless,"[7] she wrote to him while they were editing Emily Dickinson's poetry. William Winter said, perhaps extravagantly, that Higginson represented "all that is highest and therefore best in American literature."[8] Philip R. Ammidon, in writing a biographical sketch of Higginson for the New England Magazine, placed this New Englander among the foremost essayists of the time:

> ...as essayist, historian, and lecturer... he stands pre-eminent... .
> . . . . . .
> There are three American essayists living, who together occupy the first rank, and in due order the list may read: Holmes,

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[5] W.D. Howells, Literature and Life (New York [1911]), p. 180.

[6] W.D. Howells, Literary Friends and Acquaintance (New York [1911]), p. 147.

[7] Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestor's Brocades (New York, 1945), p. 149.

[8] William Winter, Old Friends, Being Literary Recollections of Other Days (New York, 1914), p. 122.

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Higginson, and Lowell.[9]

Immediately after Higginson's death in 1911, dozens of obituaries appeared in American magazines. Edwin D. Mead, writing in the New England Magazine, declared that

> upon distinctly literary themes and as a representative of literary art, Colonel Higginson stands in the very front American rank. No American essays, save Emerson's and Lowell's alone, are of higher importance or greater charm than his, and his best essays are entitled to rank with Lowell's own. He has been a constant force for culture.[10]

The obituary notice in the Outlook, a magazine which had counted Higginson among its frequent contributors, summed up the qualities which had endeared Higginson to so many of his contemporaries:

> Colonel Higginson had the New England alertness of mind, the New England passion for the betterment of society, the eager New England interest in all things intellectual and ethical, and a touch of the New England critical instinct... first and last.../he/ was a man of letters... . Although himself a man of independent temper and of a vigorous and individual talent, his work was enriched by his wide and intimate association with the most important group of writers who have yet appeared in America... . He was a passionate believer in the largest possibilities of human progress, and a devoted and ardent American in his faith in humanity and his belief in popular institutions.[11]

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[9]Philip R. Ammidon, "Thomas Wentworth Higginson," New England Magazine, VI, old series (1888), 597.

[10]Edwin D. Mead, "Thomas Wentworth Higginson," New England Magazine, XLIV, new series (1911), 404.

[11]"Thomas Wentworth Higginson," Outlook, XCVIII (1911), 99.

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Such was the general tone of the opinions expressed about Higginson in his own time. The appraisals were enthusiastic. His reputation as a notable figure in American literature seemed well established.

Higginson was well aware of the uncertainty attending literary fame. He had observed that Edwin Percy Whipple, "who was at first thought a second Macaulay," had become "an almost vanished force"[12] by the end of the nineteenth century. He noted that in merely a few years "the circle of books alters swiftly and strangely as that of men who write or the boys who read them."[13] The great figures in literature were not subject to such fluctuations in fame, for they were securely established in the popular interest;[14] it was the young author, the writer not yet among the giants who had to endure the "vibrations of the pendulum."[15] Changes in taste cause these "vibrations." For example, when public taste prefers realism to idealism, the idealists fall into obscurity--but they can cling to the hope that another change in taste will restore their reputation.[16] Thus the literary pendulum swings in accord with changes in the interests of men.

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[12]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Cheerful Yesterdays (Boston, 1898), p. 170.

[13]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The New World and the New Book (Boston, 1892), pp. 213-214.

[14]Ibid., p. 185.

[15]Ibid., p. 216.

[16]Ibid., pp. 218-219.

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Higginson's literary reputation was likewise subject to the swing of the pendulum. Several decades before his death the forces were gathering that were to obscure his literary fame and disparage his ideas about literature. A reaction against traditionalism and enervated moral idealism set in so violently among certain critics in the early 1900's that they were soon to hold all post Civil War writers suspect who were associated in any way with the New England school that clung to tradition, discipline, and decorum. Higginson's reputation was engulfed by the attack upon academic orthodoxy in life and literature. His positive values were disregarded, and he was pigeon-holed with his "genteel" contemporaries, to be virtually forgotten.

Philosopher George Santayana played a major part in accelerating the forces that were to be the chief factors in obscuring Higginson's reputation. In October, 1911, less than five months after the Colonel's death, Santayana published his attack upon what he termed "the genteel tradition."[17] He saw this tradition characterized by convention, conservatism, optimism, politeness, and "cool abstract piety."[18] It was academic idealism, "often simply a way of whitewashing and

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[17]George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," University of California Chronicle, XIII, No. 4 (Oct., 1911), 357-380.

[18]Ibid., p. 376.

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adoring things as they are."[19] It saw nature existing for the sake of "static harmonies, self-unfolding destinies...formal method and abstract law."[20] He compared its manifestation in New England to an Indian summer:

> About the middle of the nineteenth century, in the quiet sunshine of provincial prosperity, New England had an Indian summer of the mind; and an agreeable reflective literature showed how brilliant that russet and yellow season could be. There were poets, historians, orators, preachers, most of whom had studied foreign literatures and had travelled; they demurely kept up with the times; they were universal humanists. But it was all a harvest of leaves; these worthies had an expurgated and barren conception of life; theirs was the purity of sweet old age. Sometimes they made attempts to rejuvenate their minds by broaching native subjects; they wished to prove how much matter for poetry the new world supplied and they wrote 'Rip Van Winkle,' 'Hiawatha,' or 'Evangeline,' but the inspiration did not seem much more American than that of Swift or Ossian or Chateaubriand. These native writers lacked native roots and fresh sap because the American intellect itself lacked them. Their culture was half a pious survival, half an intentional acquirement, it was not the inevitable flowering of a fresh experience.[21]

According to Santayana, our poets at mid-century and after constituted "that prim little moral circle that thought it had overcome everything when in fact it had touched nothing."[22]

Including Santayana's initial attack on genteelism, seven fairly detailed studies have been made which cover virtually

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[19] Ibid., p. 377.

[20] Ibid., p. 374.

[21] George Santayana, Character and Opinion in the United States (New York, 1920), pp. 1-2.

[22] George Santayana, "Genteel American Poetry," New Republic, III (1915), 94.

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all that has been said about the characteristics of this phase of American thought. Many other critics and historians use the term today, but most of them assume that their readers are familiar with its meaning. In addition to Santayana's attempt, the problem of defining the genteel tradition has been considered by Frederic I. Carpenter,[23] Bernard Smith,[24] V.L. Parrington,[25] Grant C. Knight,[26] Malcolm Cowley,[27] and Camillo von Klenze.[28] Of these critics, Parrington and Cowley join Santayana in strong denunciation; the others are more objective in their approach, although each critic approaches the subject from his own point of view. Only Knight makes a strong case for positive values, and even he admits that the tradition had an Achilles Heel--its belief in the maintenance of the status quo.[29]

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[23]"The Genteel Tradition: A Re-interpretation," New England Quarterly, XV (1942), 427-443; also "Bronson Alcott: Genteel Transcendentalist, an Essay in Definition," New England Quarterly, XIII (1940), 34-38.

[24]Forces in American Criticism, New York [1939].

[25]"The Reign of the Genteel," and "The Authentic Brahmin," The Romantic Revolution in America 1800-1860 (New York [1927]), pp. 435-441; 451-472; also "The Culture of the Seventies," The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920 (New York, 1930), pp. 48-69.

[26]James Lane Allen and the Genteel Tradition, (Chapel Hill [N.C.], 1935).

[27]"Foreword: The Revolt Against Gentility," After the Genteel Tradition, American Writers Since 1910 (New York, 1937), pp. 2-25.

[28]Charles Timothy Brooks Translator from the German and the Genteel Tradition, Modern Language Association Monograph Series, VII, 1937.

[29]James Lane Allen and the Genteel Tradition, pp. 277-278.

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These seven critics are in substantial agreement about the nature of the genteel tradition. There is unanimity of opinion about the prominent role played by morality; an interest in goodness is recognized as basic in the genteel attitude. This ethical emphasis is akin to the type of conservatism in English thought that is sometimes misleadingly called Victorian. Refinement, respectability, and politeness are made ends in themselves. To be decorous is to follow the established rules of conduct unquestioningly. This moral code is an hereditary one, and no attempt is made to relate it to the imperatives of the present. Thus these critics find the morality of the genteel tradition to be academic; the stimulus for reform is gone from its idealism. The inherited system is regarded as perfect, and current actualities are overlooked. These critics are agreed that only an aristocratic minority could live by such a code in the midst of the realities of the late nineteenth century.

These critics also agree that the tradition's emphasis upon morality influenced its ideas about literature. Goodness and beauty were regarded as being synonymous; literature was expected to elevate man as well as please him. Life and literature were to reveal nobility and high purpose; neither should be concerned with the common or vulgar or with forces that disturb the status quo.

These seven analyses also point out that respect for

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authority characterized the philosophy of the genteel tradition. The tradition's highly conservative mentality, shunning change, sought knowledge in the past, in European and classical learning, and in early American thought which was the projection of European ideas. Classical study was congenial to genteel scholars. Many of them also showed great deference to England as the chief source of America's culture.

Briefly, it can be said that the genteel tradition is characterized by a traditional, moralistic attitude governing the behavior of a secure and established social class and isolating that class from reality. It is seen as an hereditary way of life stressing refinement, decorum, and goodness in its dutiful conformity to an inherited moral code.

Even as these scholars pointed out the weaknesses of the tradition, American criticism began to abound in generalizations about writers who had failed to swing with the literary pendulum to the extremes of realism. The term "genteel" became a convenient label, weighted with connotation. For example, it suggested disease, sterility, anemia, and death to V.L. Parrington.[30] Besides, no degrees of gentility were recognized by most critics, and seldom was the possibility admitted that value might be present in

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[30]V.L. Parrington, The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920, pp. 52-54.

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this philosophy. Few critics seemed to consider whether or not their victims might be more than mere votaries of prudery. The term "genteel tradition" became a weapon used by the defenders of naturalism against those who continued to ask for an ethical interpretation of life.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson did not escape such disparagement. There were critics ready to point out (when they deigned to notice him at all) that his life and work were characterized by the earmarks of the genteel tradition. Typical of such comment is that of George F. Whicher:

> At the beginning of the period [immediately following the Civil War] Boston was the literary capital and poetry still in the ascendant. Led by two successive editors of the Atlantic Monthly, William Dean Howells and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, and by their literary henchman, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Boston group included a cluster of feminine writers, of whom the most notable were Helen Hunt, Harriett Prescott Spofford, and Celia Thaxter. Their leading trait, on the whole, was the will to soar, a trait easily acquired from the major New England poets to whom they could not escape paying reverent homage. In so far as they made any new departure, it was in the direction of technical precision and refinement of expression. Their output was fluent and flawless, signifying nothing in particular. Howells, indeed, in the slender sheaf of his verse as also in his novels, and Higginson on occasion, revealed a prescience of social ills and a willingness, though no great capacity, to face them.[31]

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[31]George F. Whicher, "Poetry after the Civil War," American Writers on American Literature, ed. John A. Macy (New York, 1931), p. 377.

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Grant C. Knight makes a similar generalization about Higginson, mentioning him only in relation to decorum. Knight, who has been mentioned as sympathetic to the tradition, places the Colonel specifically among the writers frequently recognized as genteel:

> The Old Guard, who wore the same uniform as his /Allen's/, who had confronted with him the ranks of vulgarity and indecency, were trooping from the field and could no longer give him spiritual comradeship: Charles Dudley Warner had died in 1900, Stoddard in 1903, Aldrich in 1907, Stedman in 1908, Richard Watson Gilder and Edward E. Hale in 1909, Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1911, S. Weir Mitchell in 1914.[32]

Ludwig Lewisohn identifies Higginson with the critics and essayists who "made a cult of cleanness and propriety...,"[33] listing him with Donald G. Mitchell, George W. Curtis, William Winter, Brander Matthews, Hamilton Mabie, Henry Van Dyke, and Agnes Repplier.[34] Bernard DeVoto sees Higginson simply as a New Englander who is squeamish about propriety.[35] Van Wyck Brooks wavers between ridiculing him as an example of the decadence of New England[36] and praising him dubiously as a "generous,

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[32]Grant C. Knight, James Lane Allen and the Genteel Tradition, p. 196.

[33]Ludwig Lewisohn, The Story of American Literature (New York, 1932), p. 84.

[34]Ibid., p. 85.

[35]Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain's America (Boston, 1932), pp. 195, 202.

[36]Van Wyck Brooks, "The Twilight of New England," Sketches in Criticism (New York /1932/), pp. 211-217.

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valorous, hopeful soul... ."[37]

Percy H. Boynton, in describing Higginson, lists characteristics associated with the genteel tradition by its most unfavorable critics:

> /Higginson/ was a local man, in the best sense a hearty provincial, a fit representative of Bostonia.[38]

> He liked literary men, but had no passion for books; as for the other arts, if his pages were to be the sole evidence of them, the evidence would be nil. He revealed at times a happy gift of phrase, but no style or even stylisms. He was a thoroughly Saturday-clubbish manner of man, good-humored, cheerful, self-contained, capable of a good fight, though anything but pugnacious, and withal a conscious and reasoned optimist.[39]

Thus in 1924, thirteen years after Higginson's death, Boyhton has expressed views which demonstrate the intensity of the attack launched against writers labelled as "genteel."

As a biographer of Emily Dickinson, George F. Whicher expresses opinions about Higginson similar to those already noted; his fellow biographer Genevieve Taggard agrees with him. These two biographers make a substantial contribution to the present widely accepted view of Higginson as a critic so narrow and conventional that he lacked discrimination and

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[37]Van Wyck Brooks, New England Indian Summer, 1865-1915 (New York, 1940), p. 129.

[38]Percy H. Boynton, "Boston and Bohemia," Some Contemporary Americans (Chicago, 1924), p. 216.

[39]Ibid., p. 224.

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literary acumen. They have spoken assuredly about his conventional attitude and have failed to give him credit for recognizing Emily Dickinson's genius so surely as he did--and when he did.[40] As a result of the sketchy treatment they give him, Higginson is known to many students of American literature merely as a conservative adviser to Emily, advocating "surgery" which she failed to perform, and failing to understand his shy pupil.

And since, unfortunately, Higginson is known now perhaps more for his interest in Emily Dickinson's poetry than for any other of his many interests, it is regrettable that these biographers have made such hasty generalizations about him. For example, Genevieve Taggard declares that "in a literary world /Higginson/ could not always tell a hawk from a handsaw,"[41] and George F. Whicher affirms that

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[40]The danger of lumping Higginson with genteel critics who refused to accept Emily Dickinson's poetry is illustrated by the following comment from the January, 1892, Atlantic Monthly. This passage shows how narrow the conventional critics could be about the poetry and Higginson's appraisal of it: "I fail to detect in her work any of that profound thought which her editor professes to discover in it. The phenomenal insight, I am inclined to believe, exists only in his partiality; for whenever a woman poet is in question, Mr. Higginson always puts on his rose-colored spectacles... . Miss Dickinson's versicles have a queerness and a quaintness that have stirred a momentary curiosity in emotional bosoms. Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood." According to Mabel Todd Bingham (Ancestors' Brocades, p. 187), this review was attributed to Agnes Repplier by Higginson, but the author proved to be Thomas Bailey Aldrich.

[41]Genevieve Taggard, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson (New York, 1930), p. 168.

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> Feminine genius was all of a piece to him, whether manifested by a Lucy Stone, an Anne Whitney, an Emily Dickinson or a Queen Victoria. He approved it in the lump in a warm blur of chivalrous devotion, giving his allegiance to Woman in the abstract as he had previously given it to the Negro Slave. This temper of mind did not make for critical discrimination.[42]

And again, with direct reference to Emily Dickinson, he declares that

> more than most poets, she had been exposed to the attack of formal critics. At the head of this list must be placed her chosen guide, Thomas Wentworth Higginson.[43]

Much more fair and balanced is Millicent Todd Bingham's portrayal of Higginson as editor and appreciator of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Though she is concerned chiefly with the period of editing and publishing, and, as a consequence, goes into detail about the editorial problems, she does not neglect to make clear that Higginson appreciated the poetry, wrote enthusiastically to promote it, and recommended it to Houghton Mifflin for publication--to the great consternation of that publishing house. "They thought that Higginson must be losing his mind to recommend such stuff."[44] She tells us too that although Higginson "usually stood for correct usage,"

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[42]George F. Whicher, This Was a Poet (New York, 1939), p. 120.

[43]Ibid., p. 228.

[44]Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades, footnote, p. 51.

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he was willing to waive correctness for effective expression.[45] Mrs. Bingham makes it clear that her mother had no misgivings about her fellow editor.

There have been other exponents of a broader, more balanced view of Higginson. In 1923, Bliss Perry, in praising the Colonel for his "golden sentences," anticipated later criticism of Higginson as a representative of the genteel tradition, but he emphasized the tradition's interest in the authority of the past. Perry saw Higginson's style as that "of many of the immortal classics and humanists."[46] Similarly, George S. Hellman in the Cambridge History of American Literature points to Higginson's interest in the past and classifies him as an essayist "sympathetically familiar with the culture of the ancients as with the creative thought of modern democracy."[47] Bernard Smith recognizes genteelism as a characteristic of Higginson, but sees him as

> perhaps the last critic of any importance who came out of the nineteenth-century Boston-Cambridge culture... . There was deep sincerity in his desire to see the fruits of learning carried into provincial homes.[48]

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[45] Ibid., p. 41.

[46] Bliss Perry, "The Colonel's Quality," The Praise of Folly and Other Papers (Boston, 1923), p. 79.

[47] George S. Hellman, "Later Essayists," Cambridge History of American Literature (New York, 1921), III, 119.

[48] Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 258.

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Most divergent of the present day views of Higginson are those of several critics who classify him as a Transcendentalist. They follow in the footsteps of O.B. Frothingham, who listed Higginson with the Transcendentalists. These critics remember his interest in Theodore Parker, Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, and recall the early influence of the Transcendentalists upon him. Thus V.L. Parrington places him with these New England "thinkers and liberals."[49] Clarence L.F. Gohdes makes a similar judgment concerning Higginson, listing him among the Transcendentalists.[50] Howard W. Hintz, in a New York University dissertation completed in 1937, also finds this Transcendental element in Higginson along with a genteel, academic one:

> ...both in the scope and emphasis of his critical writing there is a clear and rather extensive mirroring of the pervading force of the 'genteel tradition,' of Transcendentalist idealism, of social and democratic liberalism, of the growing self and national consciousness of American intellectual leaders... .[51]
>
> /Higginson is/ heir both of the Concord Transcendentalists and of the Cambridge academicians... . In his major emphasis he is swayed first by one and then by the other influence.[52]

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[49]V.L. Parrington, The Romantic Revolution in America 1800-1860, p. 314.

[50]Clarence L.F. Gohdes, The Periodicals of American Transcendentalism (Durham /N.C./, 1931), p. 10.

[51]Howard W. Hintz, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Disciple of the Newness (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, New York University, 1937), p. 326.

[52]Ibid., p. 327.

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Hintz provides a general picture of Higginson and his work. This thesis is on such a broad, all-inclusive scale that detailed analysis is precluded. All aspects of Higginson's writing are surveyed, from belles lettres to historical studies. Hintz, himself, indicates the need for more intensive study. For example, after pointing out that Higginson makes critical comments in most of his work, Hintz adds:

> As a matter of fact it would require a study as long as this entire thesis to do full justice to Higginson's literary criticism, judged, that is, from the standpoint of quantity.[53]

This examination of current opinion of Thomas Wentworth Higginson reveals that he is generally adjudged to belong in the genteel tradition. In fact, during the past twenty-five years there has been almost virtual agreement in assigning him unequivocally to the genteel school. As we have seen, today Higginson is usually "lumped" with all the writers of his time, and particularly those post-Civil War ones, who showed prominent genteel characteristics--not with Lowell, Longfellow, and Holmes, but with a host of smaller fry including Thomas Bailey Aldrich, R.H. Stoddard, Edmund Clarence Stedman, R.W. Gilder, Donald G. Mitchell, William Winter, George William Curtis, Charles Eliot Norton, Hamilton Wright Mabie, Agnes Repplier, E.P. Whipple, James Lane Allen, Brander Matthews, Edward Everett Hale, and S.

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[53] Ibid., p. 259.

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Weir Mitchell. No one has demonstrated the validity of this generalization about Higginson. The possibility that he might deviate from the pattern, or that there might be positive values in his philosophy, has never been considered adequately.

Even the casual student of Higginson's life and work knows that his interests were varied and complex and that he lived a long life in New England as student, minister, writer, lecturer, nature lover, soldier, and reformer. Few people have been subjected to more trends and influences than he, few have known so intimately so many prominent thinkers and public figures. His great interest in literature, particularly American literature, and his close contact with so much that was written during his long lifetime make him especially significant as a critic and literary historian. As a critic his appraisal of his contemporaries testifies to independence and soundness of judgment. He indeed sought to "correct" Emily Dickinson, but he nevertheless recognized her genius. He did look unfavorably upon Walt Whitman (many critics of his time were much more derogatory and unfair and he had precedent in high places[54]),

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[54]Lowell felt that Whitman's Leaves of Grass should be kept from Harvard students. He decided it was a "solemn humbug" (New Letters of James Russell Lowell, ed. M.A. DeWolfe Howe /New York, 1932/, pp. 115-116). Charles Eliot Norton said he "would be sorry to know that any woman looked into /Leaves of Grass/ past the title page" (Letters of Charles Eliot Norton, ed. Sara Norton and M.A. DeWolfe Howe /Boston, 1913/, I, 135).

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but he praised Stephen Crane, who dealt in a photographic kind of realism that the genteel writers discountenanced. It is well to remember too that Higginson saw Lanier as a remarkable literary artist, recognized the importance of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, and appreciated and believed in Thoreau while these writers were being slighted or ignored by other critics. As a literary historian, when he wrote about the "flowering of New England" in such works as Cheerful Yesterdays and Old Cambridge, he drew upon a rich store of personal experience.

The merits of such a critic and historian deserve attention. There is need for a more thorough analysis of Higginson's position than has yet been attempted. He cannot be legitimately passed over as simply a representative of the genteel tradition. The literary pendulum may never swing again so far toward fame for this New Englander as it did during his lifetime, but the extreme to which it has been swinging toward oblivion during the past three decades obscures his place among American critics. He deserves to be studied impartially, and his contributions and weaknesses recognized for what they are.

In view of the widely divergent opinions that have been expressed about Higginson, and the lack of detailed study of the man and his work, it is advisable to start anew in any attempt to evaluate him. This study of Higginson as a literary

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critic, therefore, is inductive, based upon an examination of his critical works. The subject is sub-divided into six units or chapters. Chapter one has been concerned with the need for the re-evaluation of Higginson as a critic. Chapter two considers his philosophy of composition; his reliance as a critic upon ethical and aesthetic principles is found to be in close correlation with his general philosophy of life. The third chapter is devoted to his interest in the literary life in America and in the cause of literary nationalism. The fourth chapter deals with his views on American fiction, particularly that of the post-Civil War years during the development of realism. A fifth chapter analyzes his reaction to the appearance of new trends in American poetry. A final chapter is devoted to a brief summary of his position and achievement as a critic and literary historian. The problem is not to determine whether or not he is genteel, but how well qualified he is as a critic, and what positive values he offers students of American criticism and literature.

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CHAPTER II

Ethics and Aesthetics

Eclecticism characterized Thomas Wentworth Higginson's thinking about literature and life, the two subjects so closely allied in his thought that discussion of his philosophy of composition is impossible without reference to his views about the aims and worth of living. The ideas he chose from the myriad that were competing for attention in the intellectual milieu of the 1830's and 1840's reflect the many points of view that co-existed during those years. In aesthetics, romantic concepts of originality and organic unity were among those vying with the neo-classical ideas that emphasized universality and formal standards. In ethics, the Unitarians and the Transcendentalists were pointing out that the old religious orthodoxy, Calvinism, had failed to teach men that every individual should find his own salvation. Amid this welter of ideas Higginson found his philosophy of life and his views about art. Not gifted with a speculative mind, and more concerned with action than with thought, he absorbed diverse ideas from the intellectual excitement about him, selecting beliefs about literature and art such as an active layman would choose--an ethic and aesthetic that were eclectic, clear, simplified. In short, he sought a compromise between the traditional ideas and the ones recently espoused, for he found value in both the old and the new.

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The broad outline of Higginson's thought is well illustrated by his installation sermon, dated September 5, 1852, in which he set forth his general beliefs to his new congregation, the Worcester Free Church. In this sermon he emphasized the need for a compromise between the old and the new. He saw these forces in opposition to each other in human thought:

> We must choose between the past forms which once embodied the eternal spirit, and the other forms which are to renew and embody it now. The stern alternative always creates a division in society: the old has the court, the senate, the market; the new has the poets, the people, and posterity.
>
> The conservative and the reformer are thus the two permanent forces in society. Neither desires at heart to be exclusive. The reformer only wishes to secure the new forms, willing to retain the old spirit; the conservative is only anxious to preserve the old spirit, which he thinks endangered by the new forms. But they distrust each other and so the antagonism continues. Neither able to absorb the other, they abide as mutual and useful checks.[1]

Higginson pointed out to his assembled Unitarians the advisability of a reconciliation between the "old spirit" and the "new form." He even went so far as to declare that "speedy despair waits upon that bankrupt enterprise which cannot bring forth from its treasury things Old and New."[2]

Briefly, let us see how Higginson himself reconciled these two forces he found so fundamental in human history: the new

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[1]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Things New and Old: An Installation Sermon (Worcester [Mass.], 1852), p. 5.

[2]Ibid., p. 4.

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and the old.

Higginson grew up in Cambridge, and it was there that he learned the value of tradition. As a boy he was profoundly influenced by the evidence on every hand of significant lives and events that had become history. He was soon aware of the lasting fame of individuals and families, and of the importance of Harvard, and of the great private libraries such as Holmes mentions as the proper training ground for the young Brahmin. In Old Cambridge and in Cheerful Yesterdays Higginson described in great detail this early interest in tradition:

> It is a mistake to suppose that we did not have, sixty years ago in New England, associations already historic. At home we had various family portraits of ancestors in the tie-wigs or powdered hair. We knew the very treasures which Dr. Holmes describes as gathered in his attic, and never were tired of exploring old cupboards and hunting up traditions.[3]

He cited the churchyard as a place which made a significant impression upon the Cambridge school boys. Here were the tombs of the Puritan forefathers, of the early Harvard scholars, and of honorable, though humble, servants--all with appropriate epitaphs:

> ...it is perfectly certain that every Cambridge boy in 1830 drew from /this churchyard/ as distinct a sense of an historic past and of the dignity of letters as any English boy receives when he glances downward, while waiting for the

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[3] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 31.

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> Temple Church in London to open its doors, and sees beneath his feet the name of Oliver Goldsmith. Through its influence we naturally thought of the academic virtues--dignity, learning, the power of leadership--as being the great achievement of life, while all else was secondary.[4]

There were outstanding men living in Cambridge who represented these virtues of dignity, learning, and leadership. Many of these men held high places at Harvard. The majority of them were New Englanders--for example, Andrews Norton, Edward Everett, Edward T. Channing, Richard H. Dana, and Jared Sparks--but there were cultivated foreigners too--men like Charles Follen, Frances Sales, and, later in the nineteenth century, Louis Agassiz: "...all had their distinct influence on the atmosphere in which the Cambridge authors grew."[5]

Here were concentrated too the old families that constituted a kind of intellectual aristocracy. There were "literary families" such as the Holmeses, the Wares, the Danas, the Channings, the Allstons, the Lowells, the Storys, the Peirces, the Palfreys, the Nortons, the Hedges, and the Everetts. These families influenced Higginson greatly, for he grew up among them in Cambridge. As the child of such a long-established family himself, he went to school with the children

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[4]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Old Cambridge (New York, 1899), p. 11.

[5]Ibid., p. 14.

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of these aristocrats. He never lost his appreciation for the leadership such an intellectual class could provide for a democracy. He never condoned, however, an aristocracy which existed simply on the basis of wealth or birth. Such advantages, he felt, contribute to the attainment of good manners, but these without intellectual interests and a will to do good are useless to society.[6]

Books also made a substantial contribution toward impressing Higginson early in life with the importance of a cultural heritage. When Stephen Higginson, the father, lost his extensive holdings as a Boston merchant during Jefferson's presidency, the family library was reduced to about one thousand volumes which dealt chiefly with eighteenth century English literature and history. This collection proved none too large for the son. As he read the majority of the books, he became well acquainted with such writers as Dr. Johnson, James Boswell, Fanny Burney, Plutarch, and Goethe. He also acquired the works of such poets as Collins, Goldsmith, Byron, and Campbell. The love of books that prompted him to read so eagerly and widely as this was instilled in him largely through the influence of his mother. "To have lain on the hearth-rug and heard one's mother read aloud is a liberal education," Higginson once affirmed.[7] All the Waverley novels were among

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[6]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Book and Heart (New York, 1897), pp. 187-188.

[7]Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 14.

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the books he was introduced to so pleasantly.

Higginson's academic training was also influential in forming in him a high regard for enduring values. In the main, his formal education in Cambridge held closely to the traditional pattern so long prescribed for the Boston Brahmins and their Cambridge cousins. Higginson began his formal education at the usual woman's school, then at the age of eight became a day student at a private school. Here he was prepared for Harvard. Despite the rod which the master, Mr. William Wells, always had handy, the boy developed a liking for Latin and Greek. As he reminisces in Cheerful Yesterdays, he recalls no other subjects being taught by the rigorous Mr. Wells.[8]

While yet in his thirteenth year, Higginson entered Harvard, the youngest member of the class of 1841.[9] The entrance examination, for which he had been very adequately prepared by Mr. Wells, included such problems as the translation of English into Greek and Latin, and sight translation from these classic languages. He did well at Harvard, becoming a member of Phi Beta Kappa at the age of sixteen. He was tremendously impressed by the professors who instructed him in the humanities. Benjamin Peirce, in mathematics, and Edward Tyrrel

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[8] Ibid., p. 21.

[9] See Cheerful Yesterdays, pp. 38-68, for Higginson's account of his education at Harvard.

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Channing, in English ("Never in my life have I had to meet such exacting criticism on anything written... ."[10]), were the two who stimulated him most during his college years. It is well to note that in Channing, Higginson had a teacher who taught many of our foremost writers; Emerson, Holmes, Sumner, Motley, Phillips, Dana, Lowell, Thoreau, Hale, Child, and Norton were among his students. Both Channing and Peirce had a high regard for genius; there was no narrow concern for tradition simply as tradition in either of them.[11] Indeed, during these formative decades in Higginson's life, interest in the intellectual ferment then called the "newness" was mounting so intensely in New England that a narrow allegiance to tradition was virtually anachronistic.

In this intellectual climate that was fostering such beliefs as Transcendentalism, Unitarianism, and humanitarianism, Higginson graduated from Harvard in his eighteenth year with an education that gave him the training and the perspective to appreciate both the past and the present. Modestly, he relates what he got from Harvard:

> I had a rather shallow reading knowledge of six languages, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Latin, and Greek, and had been brought in contact with some of the best books in each of these tongues. I may here add that I picked up at a later period German, Portuguese, and Hebrew, with a little Swedish; and that I hope to live long enough to learn at least the alphabet in Russian. Then I had acquired enough of the

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[10] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 53.
[11] Ibid., pp. 49-54.

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> higher mathematics to have a pupil or two of that branch; something of the forms of logic and of Locke's philosophy with the criticisms of the French eclectics upon it; a smattering of history and political economy; some crude acquaintance with field natural history; some practice in writing and debating; a passion for poetry and imaginative literature; a voracious desire for all knowledge and all action; and an amount of self-confidence which has now, after more than half a century, sadly diminished.[12]

His education contributed greatly to the formation of his broad view of life. Professor Norman Foerster speaks of Thoreau as being able to see "the residuum of truth in the old traditions."[13] Higginson also partook of such perception. He saw the need for knowledge drawn from the past and from all cultures:

> The career of man has grown large, conscious, cultivated, varied, full. He needs India and Judea, Greece and Rome; he needs all types of spiritual manhood, all teachers.[14]

The consideration here of influences in Higginson's early environment and training which quickened in him a fine respect for the continuity of man's achievements is not intended to suggest that the past became an exclusive concern for this New Englander. The present also had its effect upon

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[12] Ibid., pp. 69-70.

[13] Norman Foerster, Nature in American Literature (New York, 1923), p. 142.

[14] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Character of Buddha," Index, III (March 16, 1872), 83.

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his developing mind. He was too perceptive amid the intellectual turmoil of his time to become a Brahmin in the aloof and narrow sense.

Higginson would be the last to deny that the old was being refashioned in the New England of his youth. The Unitarians had their great champion in William Ellery Channing, and they hammered down the last citadels of Calvinism. They joined the humanitarians in clamoring ever more loudly for individual freedom. Idealistic philosophy was being imported from Germany and from England, and never in our history has the spiritual waged a stronger contest against the material. Here and there sensitive people were getting acquainted with the physical aspects of nature--American nature. Science was about to present problems to the theologian and the literary critic, but Darwin had not published his great work and optimism about man's importance and future was not clouded by the complexities of a new determinism. Morality was an important consideration, but not one so deadly in its enervation as it was to be when our own prudery developed after the Civil War. There was vigor in this intellectual climate and Higginson participated actively in this period of the "newness" as no staid traditionalist ever could.

Among the ideas prominent during Higginson's formative years, the new interest in American nature was one of the first to attract him. An appreciation of the physical world charac-

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terized his boyhood, and this youthful delight in nature flourished even more under the guidance of Dr. Thaddeus William Harris at Harvard. "In him," Higginson wrote, "there lived for us the very spirit of Linnaeus, or whatever name best represents the simplest and purest type of naturalist."[15] At every opportunity Higginson immersed himself in the out-doors until the crisis of the Civil War robbed him of this avocation. In the midst of his responsibilities as a colonel in charge of a Negro regiment he wrote: "I can now only look back on Nature as the setting or frame of my life."[16] In 1863 he had published the nature essays which were to earn him a place among such great American naturalists as Thoreau and Burroughs,[17] essays which reflect an intense, romantic love of the natural world of plants, animals, and the changing seasons. The importance he placed upon the influence of nature upon man, particularly upon the literary artist, will be mentioned in connection with his philosophy of composition. Suffice it to say here that to him the out-door world was a unified, law-governed, perfected creation, wonderful and beautiful practically beyond description.[18] God is immanent in

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[15]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Contemporaries (Boston, 1899), p. 192.

[16]As quoted in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, p. 256.

[17]Fred Lewis Pattee in A History of American Literature Since 1870 (New York [1915?]) holds that Higginson, as a nature writer, is a transition figure between Thoreau and Burroughs.

[18]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Out-Door Papers (Boston, 1863), pp. 254-255.

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nature; by tuning our souls to it we gain insight into the divine.[19] Here is evidence of Higginson's preoccupation with one of the chief concerns of the New England in which he grew up, the importance of spiritual values.

From his youth his appreciation of spiritual values was essentially that of the liberal Unitarian. His father, who organized Harvard Divinity School, was strongly interested in Unitarianism, even to the extent of being a kind of lay bishop among the various parishes.[20] The broad-minded attitude toward religion which Stephen Higginson encouraged in his home, and which continued to flourish there after his death in 1834, is revealed by his son's testimony:

> Greatly to my bliss, I escaped almost absolutely all those rigors of the old New England theology which have darkened the lives of so many. I never heard of the Five Points of Calvinism until maturity; never was converted; never experienced religion. We were expected to read the New Testament, but there was nothing enforced about the Old, and we were as fortunate as a little girl I have since known, who was sure that there could be no such place as hell, because their minister had never mentioned it. Even Sunday brought no actual terrors.[21]

> I speak as one reared on the vanishing edge, as it were, of the old Calvinistic faith, so as just to miss its gloomy training.[22]

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[19] Ibid., pp. 336-337.

[20] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 6.

[21] Ibid., p. 35.

[22] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Future Life," In After Days: Thoughts on the Future Life (New York, 1910), p. 138.

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Later, in referring to his post-graduate preparation at Harvard for his own career as a Unitarian minister, Higginson gave as much credit to his parents for his optimistic philosophy of life as he did to the influence of two great contemporaries:

> Thanks to a fortunate home training and the subsequent influence of Emerson and Parker, I held all through my theological studies a sunny view of the universe, which has lasted me as well, amid the storms of life, so far as I can see, as the more prescribed and conventional forms of faith might have done.[23]

To his mother he gave credit for awakening in him what he later considered the three chief motives of his life: the love of personal liberty, of religious freedom, and of the equality of the sexes.[24]

Higginson became a Unitarian minister at the age of twenty-three. He was too radical for a staid and influential minority in his first church at Newburyport, a congregation which he says was "ostensibly of the Unitarian faith."[25] Later at Worcester he found a church much more to his liking, one interested in Theodore Parker's liberal kind of Unitarianism. This congregation, his second wife relates in her account of his life, "was composed of radicals of all descriptions and

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[23] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 111.

[24] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Woman Who Most Influenced Me," Ladies Home Journal, XII (Oct., 1895), 8.

[25] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 112.

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as a whole was imbued with strong anti-slavery sentiments."[26] He retained his pastorate here in this hot-bed of reform, despite the time demanded of him by his activity as an abolitionist, until the Civil War brought the anti-slavery agitation to a bloody climax. After the war Higginson was active in the liberal Free Religious Association which opposed such orthodoxies as the organization of a national Unitarian conference. His was a constant faith, and as his long life persisted on through the first decade of the twentieth century, younger critics, who had no comparable faith to steady them, mistook him for one of Mencken's latter-day Puritans.

As we might expect of one who advocated a reconciliation of the old and the new, when Higginson attempted to point out the origins of Unitarian liberalism in America, he found the religious covenant of his ancestor, the Reverend Francis Higginson, in agreement with the humanitarian emphasis of the mid-nineteenth century. "I find myself nearer in spirit to this broad platform of my ancestor...than to any written creed I know," wrote Higginson.[27] He found this covenant, which was drawn up in 1629 for the first church organized in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, fundamentally a statement of

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[26]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, p. 115.

[27]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Pedigree of Liberalism," Radical, III (1867-68), 483.

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Christian principles. In such paragraphs as the following he was certain he found the seeds of the liberalism that he and many of his fellow New Englanders believed in so wholeheartedly:

> We promise to walk with our brethren in all watchfulness and tenderness, avoiding jealousies and suspicions, backbitings, censurings, provokings, secret risings of the spirit against them; but in all offenses to follow the rule of our Lord Jesus and to bear and forbear, give and forgive, as he hath taught us.[28]

Higginson never condoned Calvinistic theology, but he sensed in the early covenants a humanitarian interest which foretold the later Unitarian emphasis.

Higginson noted that the Transcendental movement, associated with Unitarianism by the theological beliefs of its major proponents, was also in some degree a reversion to the old. He cited the case of Margaret Fuller, whose father "brought her up in direct inheritance of whatever was ancient."[29] She was so thoroughly indoctrinated in the classics that her gods at first were Greek and Roman ones and she very nearly missed the deeper spiritual significance of the Christian tradition.[30] It was, however, the broad and universal ideas of the past that were honored by the Transcendentalists; they sought to

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[28] Ibid., p. 484.

[29] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Part of a Man's Life (Boston, 1905), p. 11.

[30] Ibid., p. 12.

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move away from narrowness into "a freer and more ideal life."[31]

All Transcendentalists, Higginson maintained, were not the same. He recognized two general classes of people in the movement: the refined, cultivated disciples, and the less educated "come-outers" who were motivated largely by the anti-slavery movement.[32] Higginson was well qualified to belong to the former group, but his constant desire to act on his beliefs caused him to feel he belonged with the "come-outers." When he looked over his "radical" congregation at Worcester, he wrote that he felt a kind of duty toward it

> because I see clearly the need and the possibility of infusing more reverence and piety into this comeouterism of New England, to which I belong by nature... .[33]

The "desire for a freer and more ideal life" was passing "through the entire community."[34] What, basically, from Higginson's viewpoint, was this movement that had such a sweeping influence?

Higginson saw Transcendentalism as an indigenous movement,[35] difficult to define by those who never actually experienced its vigor. O.B. Frothingham, he asserted, has

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[31] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 77.

[32] Ibid., pp. 114-115.

[33] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, p. 115.

[34] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 77.

[35] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Margaret Fuller Ossoli (Boston, 1884), p. 130.

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given only the "husk and outside of it."[36] As a literary critic, Higginson himself recognized its final importance in the contribution it made to American literature:

> What is called the Transcendental movement amounted essentially to this: that about the year 1836 a number of young people in America made the discovery that, in whatever quarter of the globe they happened to be, it was possible for them to take a look at the stars for themselves. This discovery no doubt led to extravagances and follies; the experimentalists at first went stumbling about, like the astrologer in the fable, with their eyes on the heavens; and at Brook Farm they, like him, fell into a ditch. No matter. There were plenty of people to make a stand in behalf of conventionalism in those days; the thing most needed was to have a few fresh thinkers, a few apostles of the ideal; and they soon made their appearance in good earnest. The first impulse, no doubt, was in the line of philosophic and theologic speculation; but the primary aim announced on the very first page of the 'Dial' was 'to make new demands on literature.'[37]

Our writers became aware of other literatures, and as they did so they saw clearly the need for a literature of their own. The Transcendentalists introduced English, French, and German literatures to an American public that soon began to ask that there be an American literature too.[38] Here Higginson is touching upon the problem of literary nationalism, a problem which interested him so much that it merits more complete consideration in another chapter.

It is evident that Higginson fell under the spell of the

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[36] Ibid., p. 313.
[37] Ibid., p. 133.
[38] Ibid., pp. 135-138.

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Transcendental movement. It certainly must have reinforced the spiritual and humanitarian emphasis he had found in Unitarianism. His interest in a comprehensive view of life made him feel that it was a limited interpretation that the Transcendentalists offered, yet their world was remarkable to him for its "ardent and effusive social atmosphere."[39] Higginson did not stand back and objectively assay the movement, however. This period caught his enthusiasm; to him it was a time of "intellectual and spiritual excitement,"[40] rich in spiritual reward:

> It was a fresh, glowing, youthful, hopeful, courageous period, and those who were its children must always rejoice that they were born before it faded away... . To its immediate offspring, even if of a younger race, it bequeathed a glow and a joy that have been of life-long permanence. I have noticed that most of those who were nurtured under that influence have had the good fortune to grow old slowly; their world is still poetic; the material achievements, the utilitarian philosophy of later years may come and go, leaving their ideal, their confidence, their immortal hope unchanged.[41]

Higginson may well have been thinking of himself when he wrote those words. Optimism constantly attended his attitude toward life. " I never yet saw a chapter in life which was not good, no matter what people called it," he wrote in 1864 at the

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[39] Ibid., p. 313.
[40] Ibid., p. 130.
[41] Ibid., pp. 313-314.

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close of his service with the black regiment.[42] This same optimism pervaded his thinking about moral progress. "What recreants must we be," he declared, "...if we doubt that the tendency of man is upward."[43]

Higginson was inspired by his contemporaries, both by the thinkers and by the men of action. As far as his general beliefs are concerned, he testified that three men impressed him most:

> I was...born just in time to meet the strong influences of Emerson, Parker, and Garrison. I walked in their paths and have never regretted it.[44]

Of Parker he once said: "Whatever may have been his limitations, I have never known any other man of so large a mould."[45] He admired Parker's manliness, his generosity, kindness, and love of his fellow men. He saw him as a great student and thinker, spurred on by a "hungry intellect":[46] "...in the direction of pure thought and advanced independence of opinion, Theodore Parker was my teacher."[47] Higginson felt that Parker and Emerson complemented each other intellectually. Parker influenced the people, Emerson ap-

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[42]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Letters and Journals, ed. Mary Thacher Higginson (Boston, 1921), p. 220.

[43]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Oldport Days (Boston, 1873), p. 223.

[44]In After Days: Thoughts on the Future Life, p. 139.

[45]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Unpublished Letters from Theodore Parker," Radical, VIII (1871), 248.

[46]Contemporaries, p. 39.

[47]Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 98.

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pealed to the intellectual group.[48] For Emerson, whose work he had read over and over,[49] Higginson had unstinted praise:

> Situated little more than ten miles from our oldest university, Mr. Emerson's house has been a 'college in a purer air.' Within those walls men found their true level; no worldly pretension could prevail there, no foolish vanity; one clear, pure atmosphere of truth prevailed; and the noblest visitor bore away a higher example than he brought. Whatever criticism future years may bring on Ralph Waldo Emerson, nothing can deprive him of these laurels. Beyond almost all literary men on record, his life has been worthy of his words.
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> . . . . . .
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> The time has not yet come for estimating Emerson's contributions to the thought of the world. Plainly they lie not in the direction of system making, which is after all the secondary type of thought; but rather in the direction of intuitions, and of processes that lie beyond the domain of the ordinary understanding.
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> . . . . . .
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> But, no matter how high an author's services in the realm of pure thought, he owes a duty to his own age. The highest example any intellectual man can give is to combine both these merits in one career, and to serve God and man together. To this high test Emerson has always responded... at each crisis of history Emerson...told us in condensed words our duty.[50]

Of Garrison, Higginson has less to say, but it is evident that he admired him as one who acted resolutely on his convictions. He represented the "party of attack" in the war against slavery,[51] and he "did the work of a man of iron in an iron

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[48] Contemporaries, p. 55.

[49] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 92.

[50] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Live Americans, Emerson," Independent, XX (Oct. 29, 1868), 1.

[51] Contemporaries, p. 256.

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age."[52]

> Of all the heroes of ancient or modern days /Garrison/ stands most firmly on his feet. If he knew that at his next word of truth, the whole solar system would be annihilated, his voice, in saying it, would not tremble.[53]

Not the intellectual match of either Emerson or Parker, Garrison represented the active side of life which Higginson also sought in his desire to be well-rounded.

Margaret Fuller also was considered by Higginson as a major influence upon him intellectually. He placed her with Parker, next to Emerson, in the extent of her influence. He saw her as deeply desiring "not merely to know but to do."[54] He too desired "a career of mingled thought and action."[55] He did not want "to exhibit culture, but its results."[56]

During these years when Higginson was forming his philosophy of life, science was beginning to make the strides that were to carry it to its present dominant place in man's thinking and living. Higginson was aware of its importance and he realized that it was transforming the world in which he lived:

> Those of us who in youth saw men still habitually striking a fire with flint and steel may yet live to see nearly every material convenience of life served by absolutely invisible

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, p. 202.
[54] Margaret Fuller Ossoli, p. 311.
[55] Ibid., p. 4.
[56] Atlantic Essays, p. 79.

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forces.[57]

He accepted science, indeed welcomed it, and depended upon it to give a fuller picture of the world of practical affairs and of sense experience. He did not share the feeling of the youthful Poe, who wrote of science in his Sonnet to Science as if it were encroaching upon the province of the literary man,[58] nor did he propose to ignore it and concern himself only with feeling. His is more the attitude of the romantic poets like Wordsworth who saw science and inspiration as opposites, each with its own province. Science, he felt, should be depended upon to unearth facts and apply principles derived from them. Inspiration or intuition has charge over a realm into which science can not enter. In this realm belongs the poetic or artistic impulse--Higginson was sure of that; and very likely (he did not feel himself enough of an authority to argue the point since he was writing on the subject as a literary critic and not as a philosopher) here also belong the religious impulse and the sense of moral duty.[59] Thus science and intuition complement each other. For Higginson there was to be no conflict between poetry and science, or between religion and science. "Profounder and profounder

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[57] Book and Heart, p. 30.

[58] Poe's early literary theory emphasized imagination and the danger of its being curbed by reason, or science (Margaret Alterton and Hardin Craig, "Introduction," Edgar Allan Poe, American Writers Series, New York [1935], p. lxxxvii).

[59] Book and Heart, pp. 37-40.

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knowledge carries us far away from many an old tradition," he wrote, "but it still leaves untouched the instinct which convinces us that there is a God." [60]

Higginson's ethic, then, was drawn chiefly from the ideas of the Unitarians and the Transcendentalists. The emphasis upon service to man, the conviction of the worth of the individual soul--such ideas as these were the antithesis of those of Calvinistic theology. These Unitarian ideas were prominent in Higginson's thinking. But the moral earnestness of the Puritan tradition persisted in his thought as a strong motivating force. He preferred forbearance to frivolity, and was sure "no joy is joyous which has not its root in something noble."[61]

Such moral earnestness has sometimes been taken as evidence that Higginson was concerned chiefly with conventional manners. There are glimpses of Higginson in his writings which reveal the thoroughness with which he expected behavior to reflect the principles by which a man lived, and these glimpses occur frequently enough to mislead the casual critic into believing that he was, as H. L. Mencken might say, a "pollyanna." Thus in writing of Newport, he asked: "Is there any other place in America where gentlemen still take off their hats to one another on the public promenade? The

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[60] In After Days: Thoughts on the Future Life, pp. 145-146.
[61] Atlantic Essays, p.46.

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hat is here what it still is in Southern Europe--...the mark of a gentleman."[62] Likewise he was annoyed to hear Mark Twain say grace "like asking a blessing over Ethiopian minstrels. But," Higginson added, "he had no wine at his table and that seemed to make the grace a genuine thing."[63] Such moral hair-splitting as this may have had something to do with Percy H. Boynton's decision that Higginson's breeding was "far more distinguished than his culture... ."[64] Doubtless, it was such far-reaching concern with propriety that encouraged the belief that Higginson's interest in morality was simply narrow and external.

If we did not know Higginson's idealism to be representative of the optimistic humanitarian romanticism of the mid-nineteenth century, we might be led to conclude that his interest in morality is indistinguishable from the orthodoxy that Santayana looked upon as fostering neo-humanism.[65] As has been pointed out, during the height of the hostility between realists and neo-humanists a number of critics came

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[62] Oldport Days, p. 13.

[63] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, pp. 260-261.

[64] Percy H. Boynton, Some Contemporary Americans, p. 221.

[65] "Now...the worm has turned. We see it [the genteel tradition] raising its head more admonishingly than ever, darting murderous glances at its enemies, and protesting that it is not genteel or antiquated at all, but orthodox and immortal. Its principles, it declares, are classical, and its true name is Humanism" (George Santayana, The Genteel Tradition at Bay [New York, 1931], p. 4).

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to such a conclusion about Higginson. His emphasis upon poise and proportion does call to mind the position of the neo-humanists, but his other beliefs (such as his acceptance of science and humanitarianism) testify that his is not simply an intellectual kind of idealism. Higginson's belief in goodness is not a reaction against the ethical inadequacies of contemporary life, and literature, as the humanist position seems to have been. On the contrary, in his romantic moral enthusiasm he saw little wrong with the growing emphasis upon material progress. To him the post-Civil War period was the time when the nation was endeavoring "to build up an advanced civilization."[66] "The time will come," he concluded, "when all men will wonder, not that Americans attached so much importance to their national development at this period, but that they appreciated it so little."[67]

This sketch of Higginson's beliefs with its suggestions of their origins is intended to serve as a background for the following discussion of his philosophy of composition. Briefly, the main ideas in his philosophy of life can be indicated as follows:

1) Eclecticism characterizes his method as a thinker. Higginson is acutely aware of the value of tradition.

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[66] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 385.
[67] Ibid.

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He is convinced that there is a continuity in human experience and that the past as well as the present has its values. Although he himself stands in the Christian tradition, he also emphasizes the importance of classical learning.

He is not interested in the merely conventional.

He uses the eclectic method constantly; he is not a speculative thinker.

2) Philosophically, he is an idealist who believes in acting upon his beliefs.

Higginson believes in the reality and worth of spiritual things and is ready to act to bring about their realization.

He recognizes the importance of nature or the physical world, in which God is immanent.

He accepts intuition as a means to truth in the spiritual realm, and science as a means to truth in the realm of sense experience.

His idealism is so strongly rooted in his thought that it gives him an unwavering optimistic outlook on life and a constant faith in man's moral advancement.

Christianity, in the liberal Unitarian sense, best represents Higginson's unorthodox religious position. Religion to him is a matter of feeling, and it should be lived. His moral earnestness in this regard is so strong that it is akin to that of his Puritan forefathers.

3) His social philosophy stresses the worth of the individual and is marked by a strong humanitarian emphasis.

Higginson believes in the worth of the individual and in earnest endeavor to give each individual freedom to develop.

Individuals who have the opportunity to develop should be well-rounded, should live according to ideals or principles, and should work for the common good.

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Eclecticism, it should be emphasized, was particularly characteristic of Higginson's thinking about literature. He drew his ideas from his contemporaries and from the past; he himself made no original contribution to literary criticism. His value as a critic rests to a great extent in his early realization that aesthetic and ethical values were needed in the new American literature.

The desire for comprehensiveness, so characteristic of Higginson's philosophy, is seen in his preference for literature which has universal significance. He believed that literature should serve all mankind; in its highest development it is not to be esoteric and provincial. A Thoreau might write of a locality, but it would be a kind of microcosm in which the truths of a larger world could be found. The emphasis upon universality and upon enduring standards in art appears again and again in his criticism. The point is reiterated frequently in the Atlantic Essays:

> Art is higher than nations, older than many centuries; its code includes no local or partial provisions.[68]
>
> The standard of good art is always much the same; modifications are trifling. Otherwise we could not enjoy any foreign literature.[69]
>
> It is for literature...that I plead; not for this or that body of literature.[70]

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[68] Atlantic Essays, p. 21.
[69] Ibid., p. 44.
[70] Ibid., p. 338.

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Such a stand as this did not deter Higginson from being a strong literary nationalist. The universal meanings could be found in American as well as in Greek life. Our writers were treating the American scene, and their writing would become acceptable everywhere as they acquired taste and skill:

> ...this American literature of ours will be just as classic a thing, if we do our part, as any which the past has treasured.[71]

The "rustic, not to say slovenly appearance" of the American muse was being transformed by grace and polish.[72] She was conforming to "the essential laws of art, which are the same for the whole human race."[73]

Although Higginson recognized literature as a general term which could be used to describe various kinds of writing, both scientific and artistic,[74] he invariably used the term in its artistic sense. Literature as an art embraced poetry and all belles-lettres and was the highest and purest form of literary expression. It is difficult, Higginson maintained, to formulate any completely satisfactory definition of such literature, and he once quoted his beloved Thoreau to substantiate his point:

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[71] Ibid., p. 88.

[72] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Live Americans, Longfellow," Independent, XX (September 24, 1868), 1.

[73] Atlantic Essays, p. 20.

[74] "For under one of these two heads [science and art] all literature must fall; it may either be a contribution to science through its matter, or to art through its form" (Atlantic Essays, p. 27).

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> We cannot even define what poetry is; and Thoreau says there never yet was a definition of it so good but the poet would proceed to disregard it by setting aside all its requisitions.[75]

Higginson found one definition, however, which he thought summed up quite adequately the significance of literature. It was Sir Francis Bacon's definition of poetry:

> '/Poetry/ hath something divine in it, because it raises the mind and hurries it into sublimity, by conforming the shows of things to the desires of soul, instead of subjecting the soul to external things, as reason and history do.'[76]

Higginson seemed to prefer this definition to any he might attempt himself; indeed he felt that no critic had ever provided a better one.[77] It summed up his belief that literature as an art is concerned with the spiritual. Such literature belongs to a "world outside science,"[78] the sphere of intuition and inspiration. Higginson's high regard for literature as a guide into this realm beyond the boundaries of empirical knowledge is seen in his belief that it affords a better insight into the human mind than scientists have been able to provide.[79]

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[75] Book and Heart, p. 34.

[76] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, John Greenleaf Whittier (New York, 1902), p. 150.

[77] Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Henry W. Boynton, A Reader's History of American Literature (Boston /1903/), p. 5. In this discussion the definition is applied to literature and the literature so described is referred to as "pure."

[78] Book and Heart, p. 33.

[79] Atlantic Essays, p. 339.

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Scientific literature and imaginative literature also differed, Higginson believed, in their aesthetic appeal. Imaginative or inspired literature is artistic; its makers have sought to give it beauty.[80] This aesthetic quality is not expected of scientific writing, for beauty, he affirmed, exists above the practical realm which is the province of science.[81] Scientific writing has content, not form, as its chief concern. The aesthetic element, in Higginson's opinion, is not likely to be found in such writing. But literature as an art combines the beauty of pleasing form with the ideas which inspiration reveals as significant.[82]

In making such a distinction between scientific and imaginative literature, Higginson seemed to ignore the fact that the content of scientific works must be given appropriate expression. He also assumed a basic distinction between form and content which was to prove inadequate as a critical principle when he sought to evaluate the poetry of such writers as Emerson and Whitman.

What is the proper content of the literary work? What subjects does the writer find that science cannot treat adequately? Higginson summarized succinctly his opinions on these problems concerned with the raw material of literature.

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[80] Ibid., p. 28.

[81] Ibid.

[82] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 6.

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On this subject he was sharing ideas with Emerson:

> ...literature needs for its material only men, nature, and books; and of these, the first two are everywhere, and the last are easily transportable, since you can pile the few supreme authors of the world in a little corner of the smallest log cabin.[83]

The emphasis is first of all upon the importance of human life itself. At first glance this seems an obvious truth, but Higginson's continual insistence that literature should keep in contact with human experience and action, with "vigorous American life,"[84] makes clear that he was not one who stood in awe of books or of traditions no longer close to reality:

> ...libraries, galleries, and buildings are all secondary to that great human life of which they are only secretions or appendages.
> . . . . . .
> Words wait on thoughts, thoughts on life; and after these technical training is an easy thing.[85]

Book knowledge is necessary too, but it can never be a substitute for actual experience. The literary man needs the "large vistas of knowledge" which books can give him,[86] but, Higginson admonished, such knowledge should never obscure the man.[87]

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[83] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 3.
[84] The New World and the New Book, p. 17.
[85] Ibid., p. 16.
[86] Ibid., p. 114.
[87] Ibid., pp. 115-116.

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Fortunate is the writer who is able to do justice to such subject matter as nature affords. He is sure of lasting fame, for "no books are less dazzling or more immortal than those whose theme is external Nature."[88] Such a book, if well done, is certain to live, for its subject matter will always be familiar and meaningful to men. "Its basis is real and permanent," Higginson concluded, and he cited the fame of Izaak Walton to prove his point.[89]

Furthermore, if the writer is observant and receptive, he can learn much from nature about how rich and delicate expression can be:

> And for literary training, especially, the influence of natural beauty is simply priceless. Under the present educational systems, we need grammars and languages far less than a more thorough out-door experience... . We talk of literature as if it were a mere matter of rule and measurement, a series of processes long since brought to mechanical perfection: but it would be less incorrect to say that it all lies in the future; tried by the out-door standard, there is yet no literature, but only glimpses and guideboards; no writer has yet succeeded in sustaining, through more than some single occasional sentence that fresh and perfect charm.[90]

> Literature also learns from Nature the use of materials: either to select only the choicest and rarest, or to transmute coarse to fine by skill in using. ... The most exquisite work of literary art exhibits a certain crudeness and coarseness, when we turn to it from Nature,--

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[88]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Review of The Maine Woods," Atlantic Monthly, XIV (1864), 386.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Out-Door Papers, p. 254.

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> as the smallest cambric needle appears rough and jagged when compared through the magnifier with the tapering fineness of the insect's sting.[91]

Higginson made a number of observations about the creative process, but he never attempted any detailed analysis of its characteristics or its source. Although he had much to say about form in the literary work, he avoided setting up hypotheses about the creation of that work. He did not possess the philosophical turn of mind of a Coleridge, and his generalizations about artistic creation were neither new nor penetrating. Inspiration was a mysterious thing to him, something too remarkable to be satisfactorily analyzed. It belonged to the "world outside science" where the system-makers lose their way. In art, as in religion, Higginson was on the side of Emerson whom he quoted as saying, " ' it is too young by some ages yet to form a creed.' "[92] System-making, to Higginson, was a secondary kind of knowledge, for it pertained to the realm of fact. As an idealist, he preferred the intuitive way of knowing. He was not disturbed that Emerson had failed to propound a "system of the universe."[93] Those who have tried have not succeeded with any great degree of finality:

> The system-makers have their place, no doubt,

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[91] Ibid., p. 256.
[92] Contemporaries, p. 18.
[93] Ibid.

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> but when we consider how many of them have risen and fallen since Emerson began to write,--Coleridge, Schelling, Cousin, Comte, Mill, down to the Hegel of yesterday and the Spencer of today,--it is really evident that the absence of a system cannot prove much more short-lived than the possession of that commodity.[94]

From various comments made by Higginson it is possible, however, to outline his conception of the creative process. For one thing, he saw it as affording great pleasure. There is a marked element of enjoyment which accompanies the creation of literature and other art forms:

> If we cannot get away from drudgery,...let us at least try for some species of it that is enjoyable. It is this test which puts literature and art so high among pursuits--the fact that, for those who love them, their very drudgery is, within reasonable limits, a pleasure. The artist is, said Goethe, the only man who lives with unconcealed aims; and he also loves even to mix his colors and stretch his canvas. Haydon, the painter, says in his diary that when he gets a large canvas up, and goes to work on a new historical picture, kings are not his superiors. Every writer feels the same in entering on a new work, large or small; and if he is healthy and reasonable the pleasure holds out to the end, though perhaps with some intermittent periods of fatigue and discouragement.[95]

Higginson knew this pleasure that comes with literary creation. He once asked: "How can a man write who does not enjoy intensely the writing itself as I do?"[96]

Another aspect of the creative process discussed by

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Book and Heart, pp. 139-140.

[96] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, p. 276.

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Higginson is the marvellous action of inspiration itself. There is divinity in this force and it is not limited by time or space. He sees it as "a direct inflow from some fountain unknown and lying wholly outside of all science."[97] If men lack inspiration in one age, it is sure to return to them in another. Literary achievement cannot be at a constant height; there must be cycles too of rest and inaction:

> The fact is that there are always materials at hand, but the Creative Spirit hath its own devices. What these devices are we cannot tell. Under what laws that spirit moves we know not. History shows that any temporary inaction of the great creative impulse is but such repose as nature provides for body and mind in sleep. The awakening comes in due season... .[98]

The individual poet cannot sit down and will to write a good poem. "His work comes to him as something outside himself...; the poem...makes itself."[99] But this does not mean that the piece of literature is transmitted mysteriously from the writer's mind, ready for the printed page, leaving the writer only a passive role. Higginson recognized the work done by the "plastic imagination,"[100] the constructive kind of creative imagination which shapes and revises so that a main

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[97]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Literature as a Pursuit," Critic, XLVII (1905), 167.

[98]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Creative Spirit in Literature, Is It Dead or Dormant?" Outlook, LXXXIV (1906), 724.

[99]Book and Heart, pp. 209-210.

[100]Higginson seems to have borrowed this term from the English Romantics.

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point or purpose is realized. This shaping imagination puts the poet's idea into an appropriate form:

> Through Hawthorne's journals we trace the mental impulses by which he first obtained his themes. Then in his unfinished 'Septimius Felton,' ...we see his plastic imagination at work in shaping the romance; we watch him trying one mode of treatment, then modifying it by another; always aiming at the main point, but sometimes pausing to elaborate the details, and at other times dismissing them to be worked out at leisure. ...In all Hawthorne's completed works, the pencilling is rubbed out, and every trace of the preliminary labor has disappeared.[101]

Much labor precedes the finished product. Speed and skilled literary execution were not compatible. Look, said Higginson, at what happened to Theodore Parker whose busy life drove him to a "hand to mouth" intellectual existence. "In the perpetual rush and hurry of his life, he had no time to select, to discriminate, to omit anything, or to mature anything."[102] Reflection is a necessary part of the creative process, and Wordsworth's doctrine of recollection in tranquillity is recalled by Higginson's views:

> It enhances the truth of the poet's verses, that he writes them in his study. Absence is the very air of passion, and all the best description is in memoriam. As with our human beloved, when the graceful presence is with us, we cannot analyze or describe, but merely possess, and only after its departure can it be portrayed by our

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[101] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Short Studies of American Authors (Boston, 1880), p. 7.

[102] Contemporaries, p. 52.

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yearning desires... .[103]

Such are Higginson's opinions about the creation of literature. Although hard work enters into this marvellous process, "there is no other pursuit so unceasingly delightful. ...The reward of a good sentence is to have written it; if it bring fame or fortune, very well, so long as this recompense does not intoxicate."[104]

Genius and form are terms that figure so prominently in Higginson's critical theory that they merit detailed exposition. Of the two, genius is more important, Higginson believed. If literature is to have positive values, he maintained, its strength must come from the elements associated with romanticism:

> It takes more than grammars and dictionaries to make a literature. ...Technical training may give the negative merits of style, as an elocutionist may help a public speaker by ridding him of tricks. But the positive force of writing or of speech must come from positive sources,--ardor, energy, depth of feeling or of thought. No instruction ever gave these, only the inspiration of a great soul, a great need, or a great people. We all know that a vast deal of oxygen may go into the style of a man; we see in it not merely what books he has read, what company he has kept, but also the food he eats, the exercise he takes, the air he breathes. And so there is oxygen in the collective literature of a nation, and this vital element proceeds, above all else, from liberty.[105]

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[103] Out-Door Papers, pp. 290-291.

[104] Atlantic Essays, p. 40.

[105] Ibid., p. 63.

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Genius is not a quality isolated from its time.[106] It uses the materials at hand and is inspired by men, events, and loyalties. It is a prerequisite for literary expression. It is the first requirement of the literary man.

To Higginson, genius was always an "extraordinary miracle."[107] On the few occasions when he came into contact with it his reaction was one of wonder and awe. After he heard Poe read Al Aaraaf in Boston in 1845, he walked back to Cambridge feeling as if he had been entranced by a wizard.[108] The letters and poems of Emily Dickinson also gave him a sense of this "strange power."[109] Had Emerson had but a little more of the freedom and "self-abandonment" that accompanies this gift "it seems as if the secret of all nature would have been his."[110] Edwin Percy Whipple lacked this "ideal atmosphere" entirely and the reputation he held for a while as lecturer and essayist dwindled rapidly away.[111]

Undoubtedly, much of Higginson's high regard for genius can be traced to the influence of Professor Edward Tyrrel

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[106] Ibid., p. 18.

[107] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 12.

[108] Ibid., p. 15.

[109] Letter to Emily Dickinson, May, 1868, quoted by Martha Dickinson Bianchi in The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson (Boston, 1924), pp. 72-73.

[110] "Live Americans, Emerson," Independent, XX (Oct. 29, 1868), 1.

[111] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Edwin Percy Whipple," Atlantic Monthly, LVIII (1886), 346.

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Channing of the Harvard English Department. Professor Channing, Higginson was fond of pointing out, "certainly trained more and better authors than any teacher yet known in America."[112] The impression this teacher made on Higginson was a lasting one:

> I myself, as one of Professor Channing's pupils, have been a literary man by profession for half a century, and it has sometimes seemed to me that forty-eight hours have never passed without there occurring to me, as a piece of second nature, some maxim of that teacher. I do not believe that there has occurred in American educational history a teacher so remarkable, all things considered.[113]

Channing's ideas on the importance of genius are expressed in an article in the North American Review. They set ample precedent for Higginson's conviction that genius is the force that brings literary expression into being. Channing said in the article that

> Genius is not willing to be interfered with, and told how to work, where to travel, and what to admire.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It is irksome and exhausting to walk in the dusty track of an earlier traveller, especially when the whole world, in 'morning freshness' lies open to the observing, intrepid, and ardent. ...Such men owe their power over the reader, chiefly to something all their own in their notice of things, their manner, feelings, partialities, and taste. There is a savour of genius and individuality in all they say. They write from the heart, and we know them everywhere.
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> . . . . . .

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[112] Margaret Fuller Ossoli, p. 33.

[113] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "George Frisbie Hoar," Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, XL (1905), 763.

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> The reader will tell you that works fashioned by models, or infected with books, are but old stories, the more tedious for the finish and elegance which is intended to make up for freedom and originality.[114]

Whatever the source of his conviction, the fact remains that Higginson held consistently to his belief that genius, or originality, or inspiration was more important to literature than the other component: form. He thought Coleridge's definition of inspiration a good one: " 'Whatever finds me...at a greater depth than usual, that is inspired.' "[115] Following the conventional might insure perfect understanding from one's audience, but a deeper, more penetrating interpretation is necessary to do justice to life. True, such a concern with reality is not pleasing to many people. They are blind to the wonders of Nature and prefer a conventional report of her. "If you were to write into fiction the true story of the man or woman you met yesterday, it would be scouted as too wildly unreal."[116] But the great writer will be true to his great gift and he will not compromise. The writer who has genius "must be a law unto himself, bide his time, and take the risk of discovering, at last, that his life has been a failure."[117] The possibility of failure is great, for the task of presenting an original interpretation

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[114]Edward Tyrrel Channing, "On Models in Literature," North American Review, III (1816), 203-204.

[115]The New World and the New Book, p. 126.

[116]Atlantic Essays, p. 43.

[117]Ibid.

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of Nature that is meaningful to other men is a difficult one. Frequently the writer's purpose is not recognized until after his death. Higginson agreed that there is much truth in Buffon's definition of genius as "the aptitude for patience."[118]

But the inspired writer must also demonstrate skill in expression if he is to be a great literary figure. Higginson believed that reliance upon imagination or intuition to the exclusion of any regard for form is an extreme just as dangerous to the writer as is undue veneration for the manner of expression. The Transcendentalists erred slightly in this respect, Higginson believed, for they were "apt to be discursive, unsystematic, with too much reliance on intuition and imagination."[119] Effective writing requires both the "golden moment" of inspiration and the difficult task of objectifying the idea aptly and well. Minor writers are always confronted with this task, and Higginson suspected that even the greatest writers cannot avoid it:

> Shakespeare may have written as the birds sing, though I doubt it--but minor writers at least have to labor for form as the painter labors--the mere inspiration of thought is not enough. ...There must be a golden moment but also much labor within that moment. At least it is so with me, and I cannot help suspecting that it is even so with the Shakespeares.[120]

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Margaret Fuller Ossoli, p. 282.

[120] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, pp. 274-275.

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In stressing the need for form, Higginson was thinking particularly of its place in belles-lettres, or what he sometimes referred to as "pure literature."

> The form of literature is usually called style; and of the highest kind of literature, called poetry or belles-lettres, the style is an essential, and almost the essential part.[121]

In such literature form must be achieved if the creative process is to succeed. "True poetry is not merely the putting of thoughts into words, but the putting of the best thoughts into the best words."[122] Poetry "culls the very best phrase out of the language, instead of throwing a dozen epithets to see if one may chance to stick."[123] Inspiration and form are knit together in the finished work:

> Literature involves not merely impulse but structure... . Its foundation is thought, but it goes farther and seeks to alter thought in continuous and symmetrical form. We must pass beyond the vivid phrase to the vivid line. Thought, emotion, the instinct toward expression--the whole personality of the man and his skill as an artist--must work together in perfect adjustment, in order to gain this end. Very few men are both strong and skillful enough for this; and that is why, out of the great mass of written and printed matter which the world produces, so little is worth preserving in the treasury of pure literature.[124]

Appropriate expression of thought is so essential that "with-

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[121] Atlantic Essays, p. 27.
[122] Contemporaries, p. 77.
[123] Ibid., p. 78.
[124] A Reader's History of American Literature, pp. 6-7.

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out form there is no immortality."[125] "A book without art is simply a commodity... ."[126] And the value of style is not limited to belles-lettres.[127] It can make historical and scientific works "literary."

Higginson stressed the importance of unity in the art work, although as a critic he seldom utilized this principle. The form should be appropriate to the theme, an inevitable out-growth of it, he maintained.[128] Furthermore, all the details must make their contribution to the total effect. In this respect art has never been able to equal nature where all the parts are inseparable from the composition of the whole. There is a unity in Nature which also sets a pattern for art.[129] In setting up such a principle of organization, Higginson was agreeing with the insistence of the romantic critics upon the need for organic unity. He did little more than agree, however. He put almost as much stress, in his general statements about form, upon the value of the more general classical principle that the art work should have a beginning, a middle, and an end:

> ...it is not enough that literary art should give a true transcript of nature; for the work must also comply with the laws of art, and must

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[125] Contemporaries, p. 84.
[126] Atlantic Essays, p. 29.
[127] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 119.
[128] Ibid., p. 163.
[129] Out-Door Papers, p. 255.

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have a beginning, a middle, and an end.[130]

He concluded, however, that we, as Americans, should find the organic unity illustrated by Nature a more ready model to follow than that of classic tradition. As Americans we are not well acquainted with tradition, and though it is easier to follow such precedent, art which follows other art is not so valuable as that which has an original basis and follows nature.[131]

Writers vary in their skill in bringing about this union of form and matter. Howells, for example, had a "sense of form and symmetry."[132] Charles Brockden Brown lacked this gift: "...he had no sense of literary construction."[133]

> .../his/ plots are always cumulative and even oppressive; narrative is inclosed in narrative; new characters and complications come and go, while important personages disappear altogether, and are perhaps fished up with difficulty, as with a hook and line, on the very last page.[134]

Although there are such individual differences as these, the artist interested in achieving excellence in style can learn much from a study of models. These models need not be ancient; modern ones will do if they develop taste in an artist.[135]

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[130] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 60.
[131] Out-Door Papers, p. 261.
[132] The New World and the New Book, p. 15.
[133] Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises, p. 63.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Atlantic Essays, p. 338.

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Worthy of first consideration are natural models. Higginson believed that experience was much more valuable than book knowledge; he believed an awareness of the grace and simplicity of structure found in natural objects would do more for the literary man than any study of grammar, language, or rules. Out-door experience would reveal to the discerning person organization and continuity which far exceed those in any creation of man.[136]

In contemporary literature, particularly English, Higginson felt that there was a tendency away from form. The Anglo-Saxon mind, he thought, seems to associate art with "deception or frivolity" and, although it "tolerates it, and...even produces it in verse, /it/ really shrinks from it in prose."[137] The French provide models, however, for they are very much interested in literature as an art. Higginson felt that their prose was particularly well-done, being unrivalled in modern literature.[138] He admired the "perfection of style and the most subtile analysis of human character" found in the French novels. They were close to "the level of human life."[139] The French Academy had introduced into literature "an habitual grace and perfection, a clearness and directness; a light and

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[136] Out-Door Papers, pp. 254-255.
[137] Atlantic Essays, p. 29.
[138] Ibid., p. 30.
[139] Ibid., p. 31.

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pliable strength, and a fine shading of expression... ."[140] To Higginson such qualities represented the very essentials of style.[141] There was no need, he believed, to turn exclusively to the Greek classics to find the best examples of literature. Modern literature also had its own great achievements, and in it could be found the classic principles themselves.[142] It was no longer so necessary to seek them at the original source. The current trend, however, boded ill for style. The balance Higginson desired between form and content was being lost as scientific-minded people turned to the practical significance of expression and overlooked the aesthetic value of style:

> One must bear in mind the tendencies of the time. If the danger were impending of an age of mere literary conceits, everyone should doubtless contend against it; for what is the use of polished weapons, where there is no ammunition? But the current tendency is all the other way,--to distrust all literary graces, to denude English style of all positive beauty, and leave it only the colorless vehicle of thought.[143]

Yet Latin and Greek remain as the fountain-head to which all men may go for knowledge about form and style. These classical languages "remain still synonymous with accurate

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[140] Ibid.

[141] Higginson uses the term style in a general sense to cover all the aspects of form, whether of structure or mode of expression. Cf. Atlantic Essays, pp. 32-37.

[142] The New World and the New Book, p. 117.

[143] Atlantic Essays, pp. 335-336.

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linguistic training, and with the study of form in literature."[144]

Higginson endeavored to make his analysis of literary form quite specific. It is to be expected that he would describe what he considered its basic qualities, for he insisted on the axiom that a mastery of fundamentals was essential to success in any field.[145]

Basic to Higginson's concept of form are his ideas about the structure of the literary work. He recognized two kinds of structure--logical structure and artistic structure. Logical or inward structure is "the philosophical structure... which comes by thought";[146] the artistic or outward structure is "a well-proportioned beauty of utterance."[147] The first kind of structure is the plan of organization evident in the art work, hidden though it may be in belles-lettres. The outward symmetry is immediately perceived in such pure literature. But proportion is necessary both in the organization of material and in its expression:

> Unless this inward and outward structure exist, although a book may be never so valuable, it hardly comes within the domain of literary art.[148]

The resulting unity is like that of the human body with its

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[144] Ibid., p. 8.
[145] Book and Heart, p. 115.
[146] Atlantic Essays, p. 34.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.

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inward structure, the skeleton, and its outer structure, the flesh.[149]

If this outward symmetry is to be perfected, important stylistic considerations must be observed. Simplicity of expression is the most important element among the fundamentals of style. Style is not ornamentation added to the writer's material; rather it is smooth, clear expression of his thought. The writer's purpose should be realized as directly and appropriately as possible, without any external demonstrations of skill or decoration:

> A really cultivated person is less likely to waste words on mere ornamentation, just as he is less likely to have gingerbread work on his house. Good taste simplifies.[150]

Style must be simple to be great and to endure. Much practice in expression precedes the attainment of simplicity. A man who has much to say with little experience in how to say it will find himself confused and unable to discriminate.[151] An analogous situation is discernible in the development of a literature in a young nation. Early attempts at expression are likely to be excessively ornate.[152]

Literary expression should also be attractive. Fresh-

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[149] Ibid.

[150] Ibid., pp. 32-33.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Boston, 1902), p. 143.

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ness is the term which Higginson chose to describe this quality.[153] Simplicity should never be sought to the exclusion of color, life, brilliancy. The most profound idea should be presented in a way that will appeal to the reader. This vitality will be present if the writer is able to keep his life "fresh and vigorous, to write only what presses to be said, and to utter that as if the world waited for the saying."[154] Higginson knew no better prescription for the attainment of this illusive yet vitally important quality. An attractive style is not a matter of ornamentation, but one of interesting, appealing expression.

There must also be the richness and the appropriateness that come from careful choice of words:[155]

> In choosing words, it is to be remembered that there is not really a poor one in any language; each had originally some vivid meaning, but most of them have been worn smooth by passing from hand to hand, and hence the infinite care required in their use.[156]

Higginson was no strict traditionalist in his views on the English language. He advocated acceptance of the best usage in the language,[157] favored changes in spelling which made for consistency,[158] approved of the creation of new words to meet

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[153] Atlantic Essays, p. 33.
[154] Ibid., p. 34.
[155] Ibid., p. 36.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Book and Heart, p. 221.
[158] Ibid., pp. 66-71.

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American needs,[159] and insisted that confident use of the language should be encouraged without undue concern over such technicalities as the agreement of subject and verb.[160] He saw the English language as

> a peculiarly whimsical and inconsistent one, where accuracy is largely a matter of good custom, and where mere grammatical consistency may often lead us astray unless we are constantly in touch with usage, and that the best usage.[161]

Much finer is Greek, the best language vehicle for literature--"the only tongue that has the texture of marble."[162] Along with Latin, it is an inheritance from the past which we should not ignore. These languages represent "a learning which makes no money, but helps to make men."[163]

Thoroughness, both of preparation and revision, is the last principle specified by Higginson as essential to the attainment of an appropriate form.[164] The mind needs to absorb much knowledge before writing is attempted. After the attempt is made, revision will be necessary to insure the best possible expression of the idea or feeling being objectified. Such reworking should not cease until the best possible version seems to have been achieved. Revision is hard work and often makes

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[159] Atlantic Essays, pp. 81-82.
[160] The New World and the New Book, p. 165.
[161] Book and Heart, p. 221.
[162] Atlantic Essays, p. 10.
[163] Ibid., p. 8.
[164] Ibid., pp. 36-37.

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great demands on a writer:

> ...there is no severer test of literary training than in the power to prune out your most cherished sentence, when you find that the sacrifice will help the symmetry or vigor of the whole.[165]

Guiding the author in his revision will be his own perception or taste. He should also consider the advice of those who are "in close sympathy with his own mood."[166] At any rate, he should proceed slowly and let the work evolve. To Higginson, haste in literary workmanship could be called a sin.[167]

Higginson's philosophy of composition, like his philosophy of life, emphasized the value of comprehensiveness. In his philosophy of life he placed first importance upon experience itself, but he saw the values inherent in past experience, and thought these values should be understood and utilized to give life its maximum significance. In his philosophy of composition he stressed originality or genius, but he looked to models for aid in making expression artistic. There should be organizing principles, both in life and art. In each, however, these principles are the means, not the end. They represent the fruits of the long history of man's experience. They keep man from resorting to trial and error or from believing himself a creature subject to the forces acting upon

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[165] Ibid., p. 79.
[166] Book and Heart, p. 16.
[167] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 55.

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him in his environment. They are intended to enrich life and art, not to be substitutes for them.

Mention of principles is not meant to imply that Higginson outlined a definite system for evaluating literature. It is evident that he did not. Like such Transcendentalists as Emerson and Thoreau, his philosophy was an attitude rather than a method.[168] Besides, when he formulated his beliefs about literature there was no national awareness of a need for critical comment, no established school of critics.[169] Creative writers, rather than professional critics, sought to evaluate the writing done in America. As writers, and as pioneers in American criticism, it is only natural that they were unsystematic. What Professor Norman Foerster has pointed out in distinguishing between systematic philosophy and literary philosophy applies with considerable aptness to Higginson and his contemporaries who tried their hands at criticism:

> Writers, like people in general, have a philosophy of life, not a formulated scheme such as professional philosophers require. The informal

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[168] "Transcendentalism in its American character, was indeed rather an attitude of mind than a logical dogma; it was by its own logic utterly individualistic and unorganized. It was, on its negative side, a revolt from the sensationalism of Locke and Hume and Priestley; on its positive side a reaffirmation of the ultimate authority and dignity of the human spirit" (Henry Steele Commager, "The Dilemma of Theodore Parker," New England Quarterly, VI (1933), 259).

[169] Robert E. Spiller, "The Battle of the Books," Literary History of the United States (New York, 1948), p. 1135.

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> philosophies of our writers can be appropriately judged only by literary critics, who being literary, share the writers' distrust of fixed systems, the writers' assumption that reason cannot exhaust the whole of reality... .
> . . . . . .
> Writers are...unsystematic thinkers, for whom everything is grist...all the concerns of man.[170]

But even though Higginson's broad and comprehensive philosophy of life is incompatible with the orderly scheme of the systematic thinker, it is possible to formulate his general beliefs as a critic. Although he himself never stated them so baldly, they can be summarized as follows:

1. Genius or inspiration is the most important characteristic of the writer. It insures originality in the literary work, giving delight to the reader through fresh interpretation of experience (Higginson does not offer a psychological basis for the creative process, except to stress repeatedly the supreme role of intuition, and to mention the "plastic" or shaping imagination as operative in the writer's expression of thought or feeling).[171]

2. Experience furnishes the proper subject matter for the writer--there is a close relationship between life and art, between the actual and the ideal. The artist is to perceive spirit in matter. Nature, for example, mirrors the spiritual. American life should be the particular concern of American writers, for in it can be seen the spirit of American democracy.

3. The writer should depict life as worthwhile and purposeful, viewing it in terms of its spiritual possibilities. Specifically, he should portray the good life possible in America, where, Higginson concluded optimistically, the ideal of human

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[170]Norman Foerster, "The Esthetic Judgment and the Ethical Judgment," The Intent of the Critic, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (Princeton, Princeton University Press [1941]), pp. 82-83.

[171]Short Studies of American Authors, p. 7.

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development was finding its fullest realization.

4. The writer should master form. Literature must be pleasing aesthetically. Man could achieve ethical development in his own environment, but aesthetic form is not relative; it transcends, Higginson maintained, the local and the contemporary. It constitutes a universal aspect of literature. Unity is attained in the literary work by merging "logical structure" and "artistic structure"--ideas and expression--into a harmonious whole.[172] The mode of expression should be characterized by simplicity, freshness, appropriate choice of words, and thoroughness of preparation and revision.[173]

These principles indicate that Higginson's critical method is in agreement with the idealism characterizing his philosophy of life. The interest in genius belongs to an idealistic philosophy, as does the ethical-aesthetic emphasis which accompanies the idealist's identification of goodness and beauty. The interest in the real is likewise traceable to the same philosophy.[174] The comprehensiveness, too, reveals the wide interest of the romanticist. Higginson recognized value in the new as well as in the old; he saw worth in the unusual as well as in the universal. He found nature illustrating enduring principles, but he also enjoyed its sensuous surface and its oddities. He valued experience and knowledge of present conditions, but also held that the past afforded valuable lessons in human achievement and artistic

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[172] Atlantic Essays, p. 34.

[173] Ibid., pp. 32-36.

[174] Witness Emerson's remarks in The American Scholar.

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technique. An interest in formal perfection and ethical significance pervaded his literary criticism, but goodness and beauty never became abstractions for him. He advocated a sincere search for them in life, and in the physical world.

This attempt of Higginson to relate his idealism with the actual life about him is significant; it represents an early effort to answer a problem that Professor Morton D. Zabel has recognized as fundamental in the development of American criticism: the need to unite "the abstract standards of culture and the living experience and craftsmanship to which they were now to be applied."[175] Henry James pioneered in this attempt to reconcile "the real and esthetic, human life in 'its unprejudiced identity' with the form and laws of art,"[176] Professor Zabel asserts. But the failure to obtain a satisfactory balance has persisted. Higginson, as has been indicated in the discussion of his general principles, recognized this problem and attempted to meet it. He did not achieve a synthesis; his eclectic method yielded him a compromise instead.

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[175] Morton D. Zabel, "Introduction," Literary Opinion in America (New York, 1937), p. xx.

[176] Ibid., p. xxi.

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CHAPTER III

The Literary Life and a National Literature

As early as 1871, William Dean Howells recognized Thomas Wentworth Higginson's skill in recreating distant times and places in "picturesque-historical"[1] essays. He found Higginson's treatment of historical events colorful and convincing, and held that this achievement overshadowed Higginson's expression of his views about American culture. In reviewing Higginson's Atlantic Essays, the new editor of the Atlantic Monthly preferred such historical essays as "The Puritan Minister," to such speculative ones as "A Plea for Culture":

> It is an art, this picturesque-historical essay (as we must unsatisfactorily call it) in which so many fail, that we shall sufficiently distinguish Mr. Higginson's success by saying that he succeeds. It borders upon historical romance; and it can be even more delusive. Vulgarly managed, it is intolerable; it is delightful when well done. ...and for all its excellence turn to these pages of Mr. Higginson.[2]

There was an element of prophecy in Howells' evaluation. Historical studies constituted the greater part of Higginson's subsequent publications; they comprise his greatest contribution to an appreciation of American literary men and their work. In this manner he best served the cause he espoused so strongly: literary nationalism. His historical and biographical essays reflect his conviction that American litera-

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[1] W.D. Howells, "Review of Atlantic Essays," Atlantic Monthly, XXVIII (1871), 640.

[2] Ibid.

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ture should be established and recognized as a national literature. He did not agree with Barrett Wendell that "a literary history of America...should concern itself with... what America has contributed to the literature of the English language."[3] To Higginson, "American literature is not, and never again can be, merely an out-lying portion of the literature of England."[4] He stood with Emerson, who advocated self-reliance and the use of a great variety of native materials. The humanitarianism he believed to be representative of American democracy kept his idealism close to the national life. He wanted that life, so important for the ideal it embodied, to be depicted in literature. He became, therefore, a strong advocate of literary nationalism.

An evaluation of Higginson's wide interests as an historian would entail a detailed study in itself. The essays which Howells found so attractive were only the beginning of this New Englander's work in the field of history. His historical studies included such diversified subjects as Colonial America, the Abolition movement, Transcendentalism, the Civil War, and the fight for women's rights. He wrote accounts of such noted foreigners as Charles Darwin and Thomas Carlyle. He is the author of two histories of the United States, one of them for

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[3]Barrett Wendell, "Introduction," A Literary History of America (New York, 1901), p. 6.

[4]The New World and the New Book, p. 34.

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children. Late in life, with H.W. Boynton to aid in editing his material, he published a history of American literature. He wrote biographies of dozens of his contemporaries. The range of his studies testifies to his wide interests. These studies, however, center chiefly around the men and women "who created American literature and who freed millions of slaves."[5]

In the field of literary history, his principal works are Short Studies of American Authors (1880); Cheerful Yesterdays (1898); Old Cambridge (1899); A Reader's History of American Literature, with H.W. Boynton (1903); the three long biographies--Margaret Fuller Ossoli (1884), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1902), John Greenleaf Whittier (1902); and the biographical sketches in Contemporaries (1899) and Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises (1909). Numerous uncollected essays are available in such periodicals as Scribner's Monthly, the Atlantic Monthly, Century Magazine, Outlook, and Harper's Monthly Magazine.

These works reveal that Higginson accepted the general axioms of historical criticism that the personal and environmental forces behind a work of art should be known and understood. He placed great emphasis upon the author himself and sought to know him well. He also was interested in the

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[5] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 2.

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author's national, temporal, and social circumstances. Higginson never carried the historical approach to the extreme, however. He was a moderate historical critic, with a strong interest in nationalism. As such, he can be compared favorably with Van Wyck Brooks. His account of the literary life in America anticipated the literary history which Brooks is currently engaged in writing. He had an advantage over Brooks in being able to write from first-hand experience about men and events in our literary past. He also incorporated much more interpretation into his literary history than Brooks does in such works as The Flowering of New England; invariably Higginson revealed his reaction to the person or event he discussed. But, like Brooks, he had a genuine interest in American literature and sought to learn all he could about the circumstances and the personalities that produce the literary work.

That Higginson believed that facts were valuable in attaining understanding of a literary work is confirmed by the great amount of literary history which he wrote. It is also attested to more directly by remarks which he made in some of his studies. He admitted that it was not possible to decide the relative value of genius and environment in shaping the art work, but he was certain that a writer, whether great or insignificant, is influenced by contemporary men and women:

> [Goethe] was always ready to admit his own obligations, not merely to his own fellow-country-

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> men, as Schiller, but to Englishmen and Frenchmen; and was profoundly moved on receiving the first French version of his 'Faust,' from the thought of the profound influence exercised by Voltaire and his great contemporaries over him as over the whole civilized world. Humbler men are constantly obliged to recognize how they themselves have been fed and nourished by those lowlier still; and we may be sure that the greatest are formed in the same way, and draw from many inexplicable sources, as Heine claims that he learned all the history of the French Revolution through the drumming of an old French drummer.[6]

The genius of the writer was not to be overlooked, but knowledge about his time and circumstances was necessary in appraising his work: "...everything which illustrates the creation of a great literary work belongs to the world."[7] There is evidence that Higginson followed this precept. For example, George E. Woodberry had criticized Charles Brockden Brown's style as melodramatic; Higginson used an historical approach to show that Brown was influenced by what was a common characteristic of his time:

> What this able critic [Woodberry] does not sufficiently recognize is that the general style of the period...was itself melodramatic... . One has only to read over the private letters of any educated family of that period to see that people did not express themselves as they now do; that they were far more ornate in utterance, more involved in statement, more impassioned in speech.[8]

Again, in discussing the rise of New York City as a literary center, Higginson said: "...it is quite necessary to under-

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[6]The New World and the New Book, p. 189.

[7]Contemporaries, p. 107.

[8]Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises, p. 59.

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stand the composition of New York society after the Revolution in order to understand its literary product."[9] This emphasis upon time and place harmonizes with Higginson's interest in an American literature. If literature is to reflect the "life and the associations" which surround the poet,[10] as Higginson maintained, the implications are clear: the resulting literature will be self-reliant, no longer "imitative in theme and illustration."[11] It was Higginson's conviction that our literature should be our own and make its own place in the world as our ideas of government have done.[12]

Higginson studied this developing American literature with great concern for accuracy in his account of it. He believed in sound scholarship and took care to establish the validity of his evidence. Whenever he went beyond his own experience, as he often did in the long biographies, he provided information about his sources and his indebtedness to other well-qualified observers. Thus in the introductory chapter of his biography of Margaret Fuller Ossoli he listed the ten sources he found most useful, all of them letters and similar primary materials.[13] Again, in his life of Longfellow he drew upon manuscript material not previously published, such as the

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[9] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 80.
[10] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 258.
[11] Ibid., p. 261.
[12] The New World and the New Book, pp. 44-45.
[13] Margaret Fuller Ossoli, p. 3.

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correspondence of Longfellow's first wife.[14]

But in Higginson's theory of history the acquisition of facts was only the first step towards an adequate portrayal of men and events. Facts alone would not suffice, and an historian who became preoccupied with facts by themselves was severely limiting himself. The "picturesque" quality which appealed to Howells was more important. Imagination, the "animation of detail,"[15] counted much more than facts. Higginson learned this lesson from his college history professor, Jared Sparks:

> I have always been gratified that it was from him--a man accounted unimaginative--that for the first time the thought was suggested to us of the need of imagination to an historian, not for the purpose of invention, but for re-creating a given period and shaping it in the representation.[16]

Facts are essential, but they should also be presented in an appealing and persuasive manner. "Proving, painting, persuading"--these are techniques which even the veteran historian must follow.[17]

Therefore the literary historian needs imagination and great skill of expression. He must be able to discriminate and to notice subtleties. His imagination must make his subject interesting; his book is a dry one if he "supplies only a multiplicity of the most unvarnished facts and leaves all the

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[14]"Preface," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. iii.
[15]Part of a Man's Life, p. 279.
[16]Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 56.
[17]Part of a Man's Life, p. 283.

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imagination to the reader."[18] Theodore Parker, for all his ability as a popularizer,[19] lacked this gift:

> The...want of fine discrimination was usually visible in his delineations of great men in public life. Immense in accumulation of details, terrible in the justice which held the balance, they yet left one with the feeling, that, after all, the delicate mainsprings of character had been missed.[20]

The historian who does not hug his facts so tightly is more likely to demonstrate enduring qualities:

> ...the most laborious historian is pretty sure to be superseded within thirty years...by the mere accumulation of new material...while the more discursive writer may perchance happen on some felicitous statement that shall rival in immortality...the single sonnet of Blanco White.[21]

In his evaluation of historian George Bancroft, Higginson summed up the standards he felt an American historian should meet.[22] He should have a "great enthusiasm for his subject"; he should be "profoundly imbued with that democratic spirit without which the history of the United States cannot be justly written"; he should manifest a "graphic quality" and a "piquancy"; his style should be "essentially picturesque," and his factual preparation thorough. His style, however,

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[18]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Review of Social Life of the Chinese by Rev. Justus Doolittle," Atlantic Monthly, XVII (1866), 779.

[19]"...it was in popularizing thought and knowledge that his great power lay" (Contemporaries, p. 46).

[20]Contemporaries, p. 56.

[21]Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 183.

[22]Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises, pp. 109-114.

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should not be pompous or inflated. He should not lose his sense of proportion in an attempt to create interest and exaggerate the importance of new material at the expense of well-established evidence. He should likewise present manuscripts verbatim and not fall into the error, once quite common, of making changes in them. Such standards as these demonstrate Higginson's belief that the factual material of history should be presented accurately and with the grace and appeal of literature. The attractiveness of his own historical studies testifies to the success he had in putting his theories into practice.

The appeal of Higginson's work as a literary historian is chiefly due to his skill of expression and his live, enthusiastic treatment of his material. The exposition of his theories in Chapter Two indicated that he advocated a style that would achieve effectiveness through simplicity and clarity of expression. He had remarkable success in mastering such a style. He avoided affectation and exaggeration; an idea is expressed naturally, and the diction does not call attention to itself. The sentences give an impression of ease of expression. Professor Bliss Perry, who was very much impressed with his fellow New Englander, described Higginson's style as "light and flexible as a rod of split bamboo,"[23] and re-

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[23]Bliss Perry, "The Colonel's Quality," in The Praise of Folly and Other Papers, p. 79.

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ferred to his works as "clear-grained, seasoned, sun-bathed stuff."[24] Whether such enthusiasm is entirely merited or not, the fact remains that Higginson wrote effectively and appropriately. Style was an important factor in making his historical essays appealing.

More important than style, however, in accounting for the appeal of Higginson's work is his constant use of illustrations drawn from first-hand experience. Much of his effectiveness as a literary historian comes from his ability to use reminiscences and anecdotes so abundantly. He was preeminently suited for his avocation (indeed, it was virtually such to him) as historian by his wide and long experience among the great figures in American literary and intellectual history. As Professor Henry Steele Commager has said, Higginson "knew everyone."[25] From such a fund of experience he drew significant details and striking illustrations to make his essays intimate glimpses, not formal introductions. Thus his work affords the present-day student a remarkable picture of the nineteenth century literary life in America, a picture so inclusive and vivid that only suggestions of its value and appeal can be given here.

Higginson's account of the Brahmins forms a particularly

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[24] Ibid., p. 80.

[25] Henry Steele Commager, "The Dilemma of Theodore Parker," New England Quarterly, VI (1933), 258.

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detailed chapter in his portrayal of the many literary men and events so familiar to him. His acquaintance with the great Cambridge figures dated from his boyhood:

> Lowell had been my schoolmate and was an intimate friend of my elder brothers, as was Holmes, who was also a next-door neighbor. Longfellow was a family friend, and one of his sisters was often a guest at our house.[26]

His memories of these and other Cambridge people were innumerable. He studied French under Longfellow, and later remembered "with delight" the time a printer's boy had "laid down between the Professor and myself the proof-sheet of a title page bearing the magic words 'Voices of the Night.' It was as if I had seen a new planet in the process of making."[27] He recalled Holmes' humor and conversations,[28] and appreciated the quiet, happy life of John Holmes, who once called himself "frère de mon frère."[29] During his youth in Cambridge, Margaret Fuller[30] and Maria White[31] made vivid impressions upon him. In those years, too, he watched the brief career of the Dial[32] and knew the "Brook Farm people," seeing them frequently in Boston.[33] He visited this community twice, once in winter,

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[26]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "My Literary Neighbors," New England Quarterly, VI (1933), 258.

[27]Old Cambridge, p. 142.

[28]Ibid., pp. 105-106.

[29]Contemporaries, p. 169.

[30]Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 12.

[31]Ibid., pp. 75-77.

[32]Old Cambridge, pp. 53-64.

[33]Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 85.

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once in summer. On the latter visit he observed "the various interesting figures, including George William Curtis, who was walking about in shirtsleeves, with his boots over his trousers, yet was escorting a young maiden with that elegant grace which never left him."[34]

Although Higginson's relationship with the Concord writers lacked intimacy, he had frequent contacts with them. Thus in the early 1840's he became interested in Thoreau through his contributions to the Dial.[35] Writing in his journal in 1850, he mentioned Thoreau's reference in A Winter Walk to a "subterranean fire in Nature,"[36] and about that same year he went to Concord to visit him, finding him not nearly so eccentric as he seems to have been led to expect. This visit also made clear to him that there was no real basis for the common opinion of the time that Thoreau was only "a rather odd disciple of Emerson."[37]

> In Concord I went to see Thoreau; he is more human and polite than I supposed, and said he had heard Mr. Emerson speak of me; he is a little bronzed spare man; he makes lead pencils with his father on Monday and Tuesday and was in the midst of work. On other days he surveys land, both mathematically and meditatively; lays out house-lots in Haverhill and in the moon. He talks sententiously and originally; his manner is the

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[34]Ibid., pp. 84-85.

[35]Ibid., p. 14.

[36]Letters and Journals, p. 23.

[37]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "My Literary Neighbors," Outlook, LXI (1899), 295.

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> most unvarying facsimile of Mr. Emerson's, but his thoughts are quite his own.[38]

About a year later he asked Thoreau to lecture in Boston:

> It was a tragic occasion for me, financially speaking, as a furious snowstorm held away even the little audience that might otherwise have gathered; the janitor of the building was kept at home, and we had to take refuge in a small neighboring hall occupied by a 'Mechanics' Apprentices' Library Association,' where a dozen young apprentices, after vainly trying to comprehend the lecture gratis, turned for comfort to their daily newspapers, and the address was finished to a rustling accompaniment of leaves. In later years I used to see Thoreau in Worcester where he came to visit his friends Blake and Theo. Brown--his arrival at the house being sometimes first made manifest by the presence of a bundle neatly done up in a bandana handkerchief, or even a newspaper...[39]

Those are the highlights among his infrequent contacts with the man he was later to defend against Lowell's attack.[40]

As a boy he had become acquainted with Emerson:

> I cannot quite recall the time and place when I first met Emerson, but I had enjoyed his lectures even as a boy, and he had, in return for some youthful verses timidly offered him for the last volume of the 'Dial', written me a brief letter which has always seemed to be a master-piece.[41]

He saw Hawthorne but twice, and his first encounter with the occupant of the Old Manse was comparable, he thought, to

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[38] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, p. 98.

[39] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "My Literary Neighbors," Outlook, LXI (1899), 296.

[40] Short Studies of American Authors, pp. 22-31.

[41] "My Literary Neighbors," Outlook, LXI (1899), 296.

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Browning's one glimpse of Shelley:

> I first met him on a summer morning, in Concord, as he was walking along the road near the Old Manse, with his wife by his side, and a noble-looking baby-boy in a little wagon which the father was pushing. I remember him as tall, firm, and strong in bearing; his wife looked pensive and dreamy, as she indeed was, then and always; the child was Julian, then known among the neighbors as "the Prince." When I passed, Hawthorne lifted upon me his great gray eyes, with a look too keen to seem indifferent, too shy to be sympathetic--and that was all. But it comes back to memory like that one glimpse of Shelley which Browning describes, and which he likens to the day when he found an eagle's feather.[42]

At the Radical Club, which flourished during the winters from 1867 throughout the 1870's, Higginson saw the men of Concord, Cambridge, and Boston, and the list of members in attendance testifies to the extent of his contact with the leading figures of the time:

> The published volume of this Club contains the names, as essayists or debaters, of almost all that was most original or strenuous in the Boston of that day. Of clergymen there were the leaders of the more progressive wing of Unitarianism and of the new-born 'Free Religion'; that is, there were Hedge, Bartol, Weiss, Wasson, W.H. Channing, Samuel Longfellow, C.C. Everett, O.B. Frothingham, W.C. Gannett, W.J. Potter, and the French Athanese Coquerel. As representatives of science were Benjamin Peirce, Nathaniel S. Shaler, Edward S. Morse, Alpheus Hyatt, T. Sterry Hunt, J.W. Powell, and John Fiske, then known chiefly as a scientist. To represent literature and the general spirit of reform there were Emerson, Holmes, Wendell Phillips, A.B. Alcott, Julia Ward Howe, Elizabeth P. Peabody, Thomas Davidson, Henry James (senior),

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[42] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 4.

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F.B. Sanborn, and Mrs. A.H. Leonowens.[43]

Impressive as these lists of acquaintances are, they do not indicate fully the range of Higginson's contact with his contemporaries. Outside the Cambridge and Concord circles moved such unusual people as John Greenleaf Whittier, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, and Emily Dickinson. Higginson met them and recorded his impressions and judgments, filling his portraits with relevant details.

Thus, while Higginson was at Newburyport, he had frequent contacts with Whittier, who he felt was "perhaps, the most attractive poet I have known."[44] Of one visit, he wrote:

> I spent a day in Amesbury and saw Whittier. ...Dark, slender, bald, blackhaired, kind, calm, flashing eyed, keen, somewhat narrow; not commanding, but interesting. ...his eye gleamed with a soft, beautiful tenderness as he came to the door and remarked on the cold sunset sky... . He lives with an odd Quaker-dressed mother, who haunted the back room with knitting and spectacles;--square and mild, as the elderly of her persuasion always are.[45]

He remembered Poe reciting Al Aaraaf at the Boston lecture in 1845. In retrospect he felt much the same as he had that night at the Lyceum--as if a spell had been cast upon him:

> ...his /Poe's/ voice seemed attenuated to the

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[43] "My Literary Neighbors," Outlook, LXI (1899), 296.

[44] Letters and Journals, p. 8.

[45] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, p. 99.

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> finest golden thread; the audience became hushed, and, as it were, breathless; there seemed no life in the hall but his; and every syllable was accentuated with such delicacy, and sustained with such sweetness, as I never heard equalled by other lips.[46]

His account of his first meeting with Emily Dickinson affords us an unforgettable portrait of the poet:

> ...on August 16, 1870, I found myself face to to face with my hitherto unseen correspondent. It was at her father's house, one of those large, square, brick mansions so familiar in our older New England towns, surrounded by trees and blossoming shrubs without, and within exquisitely neat, cool, spacious, and fragrant with flowers. After a little delay, I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep like that of a child, in the hall, and in glided, almost noiselessly, a plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature, but with eyes, as she herself said, 'like the sherry the guest leaves in the glass,' and with smooth bands of reddish chestnut hair. She had a quaint and nun-like look, as if she might be a German canoness of some religious order, whose prescribed garb was white pique with a blue net worsted shawl. She came toward me with two day-lilies, which she put in a child-like way into my hand, saying softly, under her breath, 'These are my introduction,' and adding, also under her breath, in childlike fashion, 'Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say.'[47]

Mark Twain, who was not "literary" enough to suit Higginson,[48] comes to life for a moment in the account of a visit paid him one summer in the early 1890's:

> Called on Clemens. Found him in bed where he

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[46] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 14.
[47] Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises, p. 272.
[48] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 247.

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> prefers to write, a strange picturesque object, in night clothes, with curly white hair standing up over his head. The bed was covered with written sheets which his daughter carried off at intervals, to be copied by her on typewriter, his secretary only writing his correspondence. He often leaves off anything in the middle and begins on something else and goes back to it. He has always worked in this way and likes it.[49]

Such intimate glimpses as these are common throughout Higginson's essays in literary history. They are responsible for the concreteness and color in his writings. Largely because of them his works are splendid sources for anyone interested in knowing the writers and atmosphere of the nineteenth century, particularly of the America of the Transcendentalists, Unitarians, and Brahmins.

But it was not only by writing attractive literary history that Higginson served the new American literature; he also championed its cause in essays advocating literary nationalism. Indeed, no problems interested Higginson more than those confronting the literary nationalists. He argued with assurance that in literature, as in government, American emancipation from England and the Continent must be recognized. He discussed the elements distinguishing American literature from other literatures and appraised the success of American authors in utilizing native materials. He considered the future with confident optimism. His discussion

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[49]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, pp. 373-374.

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of the status and prospects of a national literature is detailed and thorough.

Higginson's definition of Americanism reveals ideas basic to his argument for an American literature. He held that the characteristics peculiar to America and Americans represented not so much a uniqueness as a divergence. He believed that American traits evolved as a gradual break with English ties took place.[50] America became a country so immense that it afforded writers the verdict of an audience too large to be dominated by prejudice or partiality. America offered "democratic freedom" and the vast possibilities of "an indefinite future."[51] Of these characteristics, Higginson found the democratic ideal of human freedom to be, by far, the most important element in what he chose to call Americanism.[52] Self-government is the very "oxygen" of American life:

> Americanism includes the faith that national self-government is not a chimera, but that, with whatever inconsistencies and drawbacks, we are steadily establishing it here. It includes the faith that to this good thing all other good things must in time be added. When a man is heartily imbued with such a national sentiment as this, it is as marrow in his bones and blood in his veins. He may still need culture, but he has the basis of all culture. He is entitled to

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[50] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 3.

[51] The New World and the New Book, p. 87.

[52] Yet self-government was to maintain a kind of horizontal perspective, never disregarding humanitarian principles. Because the South violated such moral considerations in its insistence upon its right to keep slaves, Higginson was ready to fight against it. See Cheerful Yesterdays, pp. 235-250.

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> an imperturbable patience and hopefulness, born of a living faith. All that is scanty in our intellectual attainments, or poor in our artistic life, may then be cheerfully endured: if a man sees his house steadily rising on sure foundations, he can wait or let his children wait for the cornice and the frieze.[53]

The faith in the democratic ideal sustained the Americans fighting against slavery; from it, Higginson was convinced, they would also derive the strength to create their own literature.[54] As yet they may be in "the cringing period in [their] literary judgment"[55] and their minds may be concerned as yet almost entirely with practical affairs,[56] but the time is coming when their literature will express the ideas so typically American.

Higginson's account of the impact of American individualism and American institutions upon the English language and its vocabulary affords specific information about the characteristics which he believed made Americans unique. He saw Americans refashioning the English language to make it a suitable means of expressing the abundant life of the republic:

> ...whatever good Americanisms exist, let us hold to them by all means. The diction of Emerson alone is a sufficient proof, by its unequalled range and precision, that no people in the world ever had access to a vocabulary so rich and copious as we

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[53] Atlantic Essays, p. 52.
[54] Ibid., p. 53.
[55] The New World and the New Book, p. 45.
[56] Atlantic Essays, p. 12.

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> are acquiring. To the previous traditions and associations of the English tongue we add resources of contemporary life such as England cannot rival. Political freedom makes every man an individual; a vast industrial activity makes every man an inventor, not merely of labor-saving machines, but of labor-saving words; universal schooling popularizes all thought and sharpens the edge of all language. We unconsciously demand of our writers the same dash and the same accuracy that we demand in railroading or dry-goods jobbing. The mixture of nationalities is constantly coining and exchanging new felicities of dialect... .[57]

The American is "an advancing figure";[58] he is not static. He need only be himself to be different from men of other nations. He does not need to strive with conscious effort to establish his nationality; all he needs to do is accept his own life and tell the plain truth about it.[59]

In the realization of the American ideal of human equality is there not a danger that a dead level will develop in which the variety necessary to stimulate the production of a national literature will not exist? Foreign observers, Higginson said, have always been somewhat concerned "about the possible monotony of our society,"[60] in which the many are more important than the few.[61] We have cut our ties with traditional institutions and social classes and have advocated equal rights for all men. Foreigners (and it might be added,

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[57] Ibid., p. 82.
[58] Ibid., p. 53.
[59] Ibid., p. 54.
[60] The New World and the New Book, p. 70.
[61] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Concerning All of Us (New York, 1893), p. 7.

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Federalists) wondered if a stultifying sameness would not result, creating a "dull mediocrity."[62] This fear of a dead level, Higginson held, was a "foolish tradition."[63] Hereditary institutions were likely to stifle individuality--look how conservative Englishmen became as they lost "the generous impulses of youth."[64] Democratic institutions encouraged individuality and fostered variety: "...for the development of individuality you must have a free career; and the guarantee of freedom is the first step toward what you seek."[65] Individuality, given opportunity to develop, will assure heterogeneity, for the "natural inequality of men...is fully recognized, in a true republic, as their natural equality."[66] Men will have equal opportunity, but their abilities and talents will differ.

There need be no fear, Higginson maintained, of a levelling downward in democratic America. The levelling, he believed, tends to be upward, not downward. Americans show unusual respect for intellectual attainments, and their popular heroes are statesmen, lecturers, and poets.[67] The well-educated constitute a kind of aristocracy, which furnishes the best leader-

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[62] The New World and the New Book, p. 157.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., p. 158.
[65] Ibid., p. 75.
[66] Ibid., p. 158.
[67] Atlantic Essays, p. 17.

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ship,[68] but this leadership should never cease to guide and become dictatorial.[69] Character and culture constitute the only valid basis of an aristocracy in a democracy and all Americans, whether manual laborers or not, should have the opportunity to improve themselves to meet these standards.[70] The progress of democratic levelling should continue upward toward the humanitarian goal of maximum individual growth.[71] No aristocratic class, even one of learning, can be a substitute for that ideal.

The temperament of the American citizen also indicates his individuality and refutes any claim that monotony characterizes his social order. Not only a new nation had been created on this side of the Atlantic, but also a new temperament.[72] Tradition and environment had both contributed to the development of distinctive American traits. From the Puritan tradition in America, the typical American inherited a profound earnestness and an inclination to apply himself to the tasks confronting him:

> We have still too much of the Puritan in us as a nation; have too many cares and duties and missions; we still work too hard and marry too young--for ennui, properly so called.[73]

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[68] Part of A Man's Life, p. 302.

[69] Ibid., p. 295.

[70] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Republican Aristocracy," Harper's Monthly Magazine, CXVII (1908), 205.

[71] Book and Heart, p. 133.

[72] Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises, p. 373.

[73] Book and Heart, p. 214.

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From this Puritan past the American temperament received its virtues of "fidelity," "thoroughness," and "conscientious purpose."[74]

Life in a new land and under so favorable a government developed characteristics in the American temperament which are even more typical than the Puritan heritage of seriousness. The American is distinguished by his "pliability and impressibility";[75] he is a "lighter, finer, more highly organized type of mankind."[76] He is impetuous in comparison to the slower, calmer Englishman.[77] He has more "nervous fluid" than his English cousin, and as a result is more likely to go to extremes.[78] The struggle for the realization of individual freedom has been a major cause for this differentiation between the American and the Englishman. The Civil War, which, Higginson maintained, amounted virtually to a third war for independence, was a major force in bringing the typical American into being.[79] And even though gradual changes toward a more democratic England are apparent, the difference in temperament between Americans and Englishmen still persists. The reason, Higginson pointed out, was that in England each individual was urged to " 'be faithful to that station of life to

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[74] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 267.
[75] Atlantic Essays, p. 45.
[76] Out-Door Papers, p. 104.
[77] Part of A Man's Life, p. 67.
[78] Out-Door Papers, p. 104.
[79] The New World and the New Book, p. 63.

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which he is called,' "[80] whereas in America each individual had "the duty of creating for himself his own station."[81] Americans do not share England's "deep and potent feeling of social extremes."[82] Five words constitute a touchstone, Higginson declared, with which all that is distinctive in American life can be explained. Those five words are those of Jefferson: " 'All men are created equal.' "[83]

Just as Higginson was sure that Americans could be identified by the characteristics which a new land and a new form of government had instilled in them, so he was certain that American literature existed by its own right, no longer a part of English literature. The appearance of this national literature had been a relatively recent event. In 1891 Higginson recognized all literature "more than a century or two old /as/ common to the two countries."[84] Likewise, the evolution of an American literature did not mean that England and the Continent were no longer of importance to American writers:

> We are still in allegiance to Europe for a thousand things;--clothes, art, scholarship. For many years we must yet go to Europe as did Robinson Crusoe to his wreck, for the very materials of living. But materials take their value from him who uses them... .[85]

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[80] Part of A Man's Life, p. 55.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Gentlemen by Profession," Independent, LX (1906), 851.

[83] The New World and the New Book, pp. 4-5.

[84] Ibid., p. 25.

[85] Ibid., p. 17.

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Such a transmutation of European materials into American things is legitimate; but an undue deference to such foreign sources is an old American failing which must be guarded against. Higginson detected the persistence of the colonial or provincial attitude in the thinking of his time and he frequently spoke out against it.

Higginson admitted that at the time of Irving and Cooper, the United States, as far as art and literature were concerned, was a province of England.[86] With Emerson, however, had come a literary declaration of independence. "Since Emerson," Higginson wrote, "we have ceased to be colonial... ."[87] "/Emerson's/ influence as a stimulus was quite unequaled during the era when our original literature was taking form."[88] Yet in the last decades of the nineteenth century it seemed to Higginson that there was a real danger that the old literary allegiance to England was being revived. He felt that a kind of reaction had set in after the Civil War. That great crisis had made Americans so aware of their own problems and their own responsibilities that they had forgotten their ties with Europe. Then, in the quiet of peace, they seemed to sense their aloneness, and once again they looked abroad:

It is very natural, perhaps, that after a

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[86] Ibid., p. 64.
[87] Ibid., p. 42.
[88] Contemporaries, p. 12.

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> period so exalted there should come a little reaction in the direction of colonialism. This we may see in both literature and in manners. 'Are we not provincial? Do we not lack the manners of the great world?' These are the questions anxiously asked.[89]

Politically, Americans had thrown off their dependence on England, but in literature the deference toward England as a mother country was an attitude that was difficult to eradicate:

> ...the colonial spirit still lingers so much among us that a very little English reputation goes farther in the United States than a much higher American fame in England.[90]

Higginson wanted Americans to cease being so uncritical and to recognize the merit of their own writers. He was certain that American authors were the equal of English authors. When he traveled in England he found no greater writers than those America had already produced: "...was I not the fellow countryman of Emerson and Hawthorne, of Webster and Phillips?"[91] he proudly asked. There was no need for a nation so blessed with greatness to look to England or elsewhere in Europe for the sources of art and science. Americans should forget that their nation was ever a colony or a province. It was folly to recall fondly the old relationship. What was needed was thorough emancipation.[92]

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[89] Book and Heart, pp. 196-197.
[90] Ibid., p. 203.
[91] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 297.
[92] Ibid., p. 363.

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Higginson specified three particularly important standards which American literature should meet if it was to reach its highest development as the literature of this democratic nation and make a distinctive contribution to world literature: 1) it should be concerned with indigenous materials, revealing their universal significance; 2) it should express the American ideal, the worth of the individual man; 3) it should have artistic form. Each of these standards merits detailed consideration.

The use of native subjects, Higginson believed, was basic to the establishment of a national literature. He remembered the pleasure he knew during the days of the Transcendentalists when familiar things became common subjects in American literature:

> Probably no one who did not live in those days can fully realize what it was to us to have our own aspects of nature, our own historic scenes, our own types of character, our own social problems, brought up and given a prominent place. The mere substitution of bobolink and oriole for lark and nightingale was a delicious novelty.[93]

But Higginson did not maintain that American things should be considered simply for their own sake. He believed that in indigenous materials elements could be found that were applicable to mankind:

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[93] Ibid., p. 190.

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> It is but a few years since we have dared to be American in even the details and accessories of our literary work; to make our allusions to natural objects real, not conventional; to ignore the nightingale and skylark, and look for the classic and romantic on our own soil. This change began mainly with Emerson. Some of us can recall the bewilderment with which his verses on the humblebee, for instance, were received, when the choice of subject caused as much wonder as the treatment. It was called 'a foolish affectation of the familiar.' Happily the atmosphere of distance forms itself rapidly in a new land, and the poem has now as serene a place in literature as if Andrew Marvell had written it. The truly cosmopolitan writer is not he who carefully denudes his work of everything occasional and temporary, but he who makes his local coloring forever classic through the fascination of the dream it tells. Reason, imagination, passion, are universal; but sky, climate, costume, and even type of human character, belong to some one spot alone till they find an artist potent enough to stamp their associations on the memory of all the world.[94]

Higginson's interest in universality was so great that he regarded a world literature as transcending all national literature. World literature, however, belonged to the distant future; "a strong national literature must come first."[95] Nor had the truly cosmopolitan spirit yet appeared that would insure a fair appraisal of a nation's literature according to world standards. False cosmopolitanism was the fashion; it ignored the value of American criticism and appealed exclusively to the judgment of Europe:[96]

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[94] Atlantic Essays, pp. 54-55.

[95] The New World and the New Book, p. 17.

[96] Ibid., p. 43.

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> There is no manner of objection to cosmopolitanism, if the word be taken in earnest. There is something fine in the thought of a federal republic of letters, a vast literary tribunal of nations, in which each nation has a seat; but this is just the kind of cosmopolitanism which these critics do not seek. They seek merely a far-off judgment, and this is no better than a local tribunal; in some respects it is worse.[97]

Higginson believed in cosmopolitanism, but he wanted it to represent a sincere interest in the universal significance discernible in local things. He was opposed to the pseudo-cosmopolitanism sought by many young American writers who "transplanted" themselves to foreign countries to acquire a superficial knowledge about literature.[98] "They yearn to be cosmopolitan," he wrote, "whereas what they need is to be true men and women first, and let cosmopolitanism take care of itself."[99] The great writer will find lasting values in his native land:

> The most cosmopolitan American writers of the last generation were undoubtedly Willis and Bayard Taylor; but what has become of their literary fame? On the other hand, the American names one sees oftenest mentioned in European books--Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Whitman--are those of authors who never visited Europe, or under such circumstances as to form but a trivial part of their career. ...After all is said and done, the circle of American writers who established our nation's literature, half a century ago, were great because they were first and chiefly American...[100]

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[97] Ibid., pp. 43-44.
[98] Book and Heart, pp. 198-199.
[99] Ibid., p. 198.
[100] Ibid., pp. 198-199.

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In achieving a national literature in America, expression of the ideas responsible for all that is distinctive about this young nation is of even greater significance than the use of indigenous materials. Americans possess liberty, the underlying force that vitalizes a national literature.[101] Their belief in the worth of the individual man permeates their government, their society, and their literature.[102] The Transcendentalists did a great deal to further this belief in the value of the individual: "From the depth of their so-called idealism they recognized the infinite value of the individual man."[103] They expressed this ideal in literature and thus made a major contribution to the establishment of a national literature in America. Their task was not completed, but the democratic belief in the worth of the individual which motivated these idealists is now finding broader expression in American fiction:

> ...from the moment American fiction came upon the scene, it brought a change /from the traditional concern with social position/. Peasant virtue vanishes when the peasant is a possible president, and what takes its place is individual manhood, irrespective of social position. The heroes who successively conquered Europe in the hands of American authors were of low estate,--a backwoodsman, a pilot, a negro slave, a lamplighter; to which gallery Bret Harte added the gambler, and the authors of 'Democracy' and the 'Bread-Winners' flung in

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[101] Atlantic Essays, p. 63.
[102] The New World and the New Book, p. 5.
[103] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

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> the politician. In all these figures social distinctions disappear: 'a man's a man for a' that.'[104]

Higginson did not view this concept of individual worth as being exclusive to America,[105] but he was sure it was the idea most representative of this nation. If there is to be an American literature it must emphasize this basic idea. Accounts of the more tangible aspects of American life fail to give the whole picture. Not only American types, but also the American spirit must be presented in a national literature:

> The mere oddities or exceptions of American life have now been pretty fully presented to the world. A far higher task remains to be fully accomplished, the presentation in literature, not of American types alone, but of the American spirit.[106]

The third requirement for an American literature, Higginson insisted, is the attainment of artistic expression. This characteristic is particularly important for its relationship to world literature. Higginson recognized that all literatures share models and forms, and that trends such as realism and romanticism cross international boundaries.[107] "If...world literature be really the ultimate aim," he wrote, "it is something to know that we are at least getting so far as to interchange freely our national models."[108]

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[104] Ibid., p. 11.
[105] Ibid.
[106] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 273.
[107] The New World and the New Book, p. 229.
[108] Ibid., p. 228.

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Formal requirements are important, therefore, in a national literature if it is to be international and universal in its significance. This concern for form testifies to an aesthetic interest that transcends political systems and geographical boundaries. Any literature, Higginson believed, regardless of the nationality of its creators, must be artistic in its form if it is to achieve lasting international recognition.

American literature failed to meet this standard of "external perfection,"[109] Higginson believed. Americans were too busy assimilating and producing to have time to polish and perfect:

> As yet, we Americans have hardly begun to think of the details of execution in any art. We do not aim at perfection of detail even in engineering, much less in literature. In the haste of our national life, most of our intellectual work is done at a rush, is something inserted in the odd moments of the engrossing pursuit.[110]

There have been exceptions, of course. Outstanding American writers have seen the need for artistic expression. For example, Higginson cited the "beautiful sentences of Emerson,"[111] Howells' "sense of form and symmetry,"[112] and Lanier's reliance upon an "educated love of Beauty."[113] He saw Irving and Haw-

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[109] Ibid., p. 234.
[110] Atlantic Essays, p. 55.
[111] Contemporaries, p. 55.
[112] The New World and the New Book, p. 15.
[113] Contemporaries, p. 95.

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thorne as authors whose style was appropriate to their purpose and thought.[114]

This early progress toward an artistic literature did not continue so auspiciously into the post-Civil War years. As early as 1871, Higginson detected a tendency away from an interest in form. Technical interests which developed with the advance of science seemed to be threatening its existence, but Higginson's faith in the American temperament bolstered his optimism about the future of artistic expression:

> It is my cherished conviction that this Anglo-American race is developing a finer organization than the stock from which it sprang,--is destined to be more sensitive to art, as well as more abundant in nervous energy. We must not narrow ourselves into science only, must not become mere observers nor mere thinkers, but must hold to the side of art as well. Grant that it is worthy mission of the current British literature to render style clear, simple, and convincing, it may yet be the mission of Americans to take that style and make it beautiful.[115]

Thus, according to Higginson, if America was to have a national literature, and one worthy to take its place among the other literatures of the world, American writers would have to choose American subjects, express the humanitarian idealism fundamental to a genuine democracy, and demonstrate a mastery of form. As a literary historian he was interested primarily in the degree of success or failure shown by indi-

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[114] Atlantic Essays, p. 39.

[115] Ibid., pp. 337-338.

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vidual authors in meeting these three standards.

With these three standards in mind, it is interesting to review Higginson's conclusions about the progress being made in America toward the establishment of a national literature.

Higginson's three-fold conception of the nature of a truly American literature precludes from recognition as American practically everything that was written in America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even political independence did not bring a national literature into being. Higginson looked upon the early history of the United States as having a parallel in that of early Rome. The Romans were occupied with practical affairs while founding their nation, and statesmen and orators were needed rather than poets.[116] So it was in the new republic. "We must remember," Higginson wrote, "that it was only the political life of America which came into being in 1776: its literary life was not yet born."[117] There were some talented writers, but no national literature. Charles Brockden Brown was "the first imaginative writer worth mentioning in America...and...our first professional author."[118] But no substantial advance was made toward the establishment of an American literature. In fact, there was opposition,

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[116]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Review of The Roman Poets of the Republic by W.T. Sellar, M.A., LL.D.," Atlantic Monthly, XLVIII (1881), 702.

[117]Contemporaries, pp. 3-4.

[118]Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises, p. 57.

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both direct and indirect: Fisher Ames sought to prove in 1807 that there never would be an American literature,[119] and the North American Review, founded in 1815, adhered to "a well-bred, clearly written, somewhat prosaic style" common to both America and England.[120]

There was little encouragement for writers in the early decades of the new nation's history. The problems that confronted them, even as late as Margaret Fuller's lifetime (1810-1850), are summed up succinctly by Higginson:

> /Margaret Fuller/ lived at a time when life in America was hard for all literary people, from the absence of remuneration, the small supply of books, the habit of jealousy among authors, and the lingering prevalence of the colonial spirit which she battled stoutly to banish.[121]

Higginson believed that the persistence of the colonial attitude interfered more with the development of a national literature than any of the other unfavorable circumstances confronting American authors. In addition to the deference to England, a dependence upon Continental thought also appeared. Beginning about 1818 Germany as well as England was looked to as a source of ideas;[122] the time of American self-reliance was not yet at hand. If literary independence was to be achieved, self-confidence was needed, and a realization that indigenous mate-

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[119] Contemporaries, pp. 3-4.
[120] Old Cambridge, p. 53.
[121] Margaret Fuller Ossoli, pp. 312-313.
[122] Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises, p. 379.

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rials could be used effectively.[123] Irving and Cooper gave the initial impulse to the achievement of literary independence;[124] Bryant "first set our American landscape to music... ."[125] But it was Emerson and the Transcendentalists who really set American literature free.[126] If it had not been for Emerson, "we should perhaps have been still provincial in thought and imitative in theme and illustration."[127] Emerson and his circle established a national literature.[128]

The great crusade for individual rights which culminated in the Civil War was the stimulus that brought out the best in such men as Channing, Emerson, Whittier, Longfellow, and Lowell.[129] What stimulus was to be found after this struggle was over? Higginson felt that the literary man needed to be interested in something that is "of uncomparably more importance to the universe than the development of his own pretty talent."[130] The great cause still existed; the democratic ideal had not been fully realized. True, a reaction against idealism had set in during the post-war years,[131] but Higgin-

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[123] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 133.
[124] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 170.
[125] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 102.
[126] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, pp. 261-262.
[127] Ibid., p. 261.
[128] Book and Heart, p. 199.
[129] The New World and the New Book, pp. 66-67.
[130] Ibid., p. 68.
[131] Contemporaries, p. 12.

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son insisted to the end that Americans possessed a great source of inspiration in causes having to do with the further realization of the American belief in human development. The America of material prosperity and industrial progress paid little heed to him.

Thus it was that the literary men who came nearest to meeting Higginson's standards for American writers belonged to the years of New England's great intellectual activity. It is with the writers of this pre-Civil War period that Higginson is chiefly concerned in his historical essays. It was in that period that his conception of an indigenous, humanitarian, and artistic literature came nearest to realization. The broad outlines of what the national literature might be like were clearly indicated then.

No one came nearer to meeting these standards than did Emerson. Higginson pointed out that in Emerson's work there is the use of native materials ("he took his allusions and his poetic material from the woods and waters around him");[132] there is also the vital idealism, for Emerson served both God and man[133] and the self-reliance he preached developed strong people to meet the trials of the time.[134] Emerson is also a stylist, particularly in his sentences:"...within the limits

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[132] Ibid., p. 19.

[133] "Live Americans, Emerson," Independent, XX (Oct. 29, 1868), 1.

[134] Contemporaries, p. 12.

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of a single sentence, no man who ever wrote the English tongue has put more meaning into words than Emerson."[135] His sentences are "like fragments of carved marble."[136] Referring to such essays as Books, Eloquence, Works and Days, and Society and Solitude, Higginson declared:

> It is not enough to say that such papers as these constitute the high-water mark of American literature; it is not too much to say that they are unequalled in the literature of the age. Name, if you can, the Englishman or the Frenchman, who, on themes like these, must not own himself second to Emerson. Bearing these in his hand, the resolute American traveller can fearlessly unfurl the stars and stripes in the presence of the Académie itself, were it necessary, and yet not feel himself to be swerving from the traditional modesty of his race.[137]

John Greenleaf Whittier was another writer much admired by Higginson for his fine Americanism. He recognized Whittier as exemplifying the true democratic attitude. Higginson thought him exceptional too in his use of native subjects. According to Higginson's standards, Whittier's limitations were chiefly deficiencies in form, the quality that American literature should have in common with all lasting literatures.

Higginson saw Whittier as representative of the American interest in the common man.[138] He was "wholly remote from /the/

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[135] Ibid., p. 16.

[136] Ibid., p. 55.

[137] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Review of Society and Solitude, Twelve Chapters, by Ralph Waldo Emerson," Atlantic Monthly, XXVI (1870), 120.

[138] Contemporaries, p. 62.

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effect of caste":[139]

> Whatever fund of prejudices in the academic direction may have belonged in common to Emerson, Longfellow, Holmes, Hawthorne, and Lowell, was not shared by him.[140]
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It must, in short, be conceded that he represents, as no other leading poet represents it, the purely democratic spirit, not antagonistically like some Corn-law Rhymer, but affirmatively as the basis of true society. Government in his eyes means always the self-government of the whole community. Instead of aiming to fix the foundation of suffrage in birth, wealth, or even education, he waives all these and grounds it in manhood, giving this, indeed, its widest interpretation, so as to include woman too.[141]

Not only is Whittier intensely national in the democratic sense, but he is also truly national in his use of native materials. "The strength of Whittier," Higginson wrote, "has been in finding all needed elements of poetry at home."[142] He called him "the distinctively American poet of familiar life,"[143] and recognized him as a poet aware of the universal meanings in his locale: "He soon outgrew all flavor of provincialism and entered into the world-wide atmosphere of literature."[144]

But Whittier attained universality more completely in thought than in form. Although the fine qualities of "direct-

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[139]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Place of Whittier Among Poets," Reader Magazine, V (1904-1905), 369.

[140]Ibid.

[141]Ibid., p. 370.

[142]Letters and Journals, p. 333.

[143]John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 151.

[144]Contemporaries, p. 68.

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ness, simplicity, and genuineness" characterized his expression,[145] he never became a skilful stylist. Higginson thought of him as lacking "fluency of expression" and having "rather an excess of restraint."[146] It seemed to Higginson that Whittier was afraid to trust himself as a metrist and that he often took the advice of prosaic syllable-counters.[147] Higginson also found him lacking a sense of proportion: his poems were often too long, and frequently a superfluous moral was attached to them. Less serious were the bad rhymes common to his early poems.[148]

If Whittier erred somewhat in regard to style, it was not for want of a contemporary to whom he might have turned for guidance. It was Higginson's thesis that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow made an outstanding contribution as a stylist to the developing American literature, and that he also encouraged American writers to use national themes. Higginson did not claim that Longfellow equaled Emerson or Whittier as an American poet (" Emerson reached greater depths of thought; Whittier touched the problems of the nation's life more deeply"[149]), but he did maintain that Longfellow was the "universal poet,"[150] ideally suited to bring grace and polish to the young litera-

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[145] Ibid., p. 67.
[146] Letters and Journals, pp. 93-94.
[147] Contemporaries, p. 66.
[148] John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 165.
[149] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 1.
[150] Ibid., p. 3.

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ture at exactly the time when it needed guidance in matters of form. He was the first outstanding literary figure in a nation that needed such leadership:

> It will perhaps be found, as time goes on, that the greatest service rendered by Longfellow--beyond all personal awakening or stimulus exerted on his readers--was that of being the first conspicuous representative, in an eminently practical and hard-working community, of the literary life. One of a circle of superior men, he was the only one who stood for that life purely and supremely, and thus vindicated its national importance.[151]

Of major significance among Longfellow's contributions to the formation of a national literature was his interest in form:

> ...while /his poems/ would have been of value at any time or place, their worth towards the foundation of a new and unformed literature was priceless. The first and chief need of such a literature was, no doubt, a great original thinker, such as was afforded us in Emerson. Yet Longfellow rendered a service only secondary, in enriching and refining that literature and giving it a cosmopolitan culture--providing it for an equally attentive audience in the humblest log-cabins on the prairie or in the literary courts of the civilized world.[152]

Higginson praised Longfellow for his excellence of style, saying that he would be long remembered for it (it is evident, however, that he did not regard Longfellow as a poet of the first order). His remarks indicate the formal elements in

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[151] Ibid., p. 294.

[152] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Address at Longfellow Memorial Meeting," Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society, II (1906-1907), 52.

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Longfellow's work which he considered valuable for the new national literature. The emphasis is on perfected and appropriate expression:

> The same attributes that keep Longfellow from being the greatest of poets will make him also one of the most permanent. There will be no extreme ups and downs in his fame... . The finished excellence of his average execution will sustain it against that of profounder thinkers and more daring sons of song. His range of measures is not great, but his workmanship is perfect; he has always 'the inimitable grace of not too much;' he has tested all literature, all poetic motives, and all the simpler forms of versification, and he can never be taken unprepared.[153]

If Higginson had gone no further than this in his analysis of Longfellow's role in the development of an American literature, he would have set up a very tenuous case only for Longfellow as a literary nationalist. He did not rest his case on form alone, however; he also endeavored to prove that Longfellow had a life-long interest in an indigenous literature. Regardless of the validity of this position, the fact remains that Higginson gathered evidence to show that Longfellow had from his youth an "essentially American feeling"[154] and a preference for such "home themes" as the traditions of New England[155] and the life of the American Indian.[156] In 1868 Higginson lacked such assurance about Longfellow's Americanism:

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[153] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 262.
[154] Ibid., p. 21.
[155] Ibid., p. 130.
[156] Ibid., p. 207.

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> We all complained of want of polish. We thought we needed a poet whose training should be sufficiently comprehensive, whose resources and standards should be European. We obtained it in Longfellow; and after all, there was something wanting, and we had to look for it in Whittier.
>
> It appeared that in Mr. Longfellow's case, in losing what Matthew Arnold calls 'the note of provincialism,' we lost also the home atmosphere and the local coloring. ...many of his most laborious works seem well matched by those English illustrations of his books, where the youths and maidens of Massachusetts wear jerkins and kirtles. His 'Tales of a Wayside Inn' are merely the 'Saga of King Olof [sic],' with a preface. Take out the eight pages of 'Paul Revere's Ride,' and there is no more of American breath in the whole series than is to be found in Chaucer.[157]

By 1902 Higginson had changed his mind. He had reviewed Longfellow's literary career, and he was certain that nationalism had been the poet's primary motivation:

> The great literary lesson of Longfellow's life is to be found, after all, in this, that while he was the first among American poets to create for himself a world-wide fame, he was guided from youth to age by a strong national feeling, or at any rate by the desire to stand for the life and the associations by which he was actually surrounded. Such a tendency has been traced in this volume from his first childish poetry through his chosen theme for a college debate, his commencement oration, his plans formed during a first foreign trip, and the appeal made in his first really original paper in the 'North American Review.'[158]

Thus in Higginson's final judgment Longfellow was a literary nationalist. The view that nationalism was Longfellow's pri-

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[157] "Live Americans, Longfellow," Independent, XX (Sept. 24, 1868), 1.

[158] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 258.

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mary motivation is open to question, of course. William Allan Neilson, for example, in reviewing Higginson's biography of Longfellow, was perhaps the first to voice an objection. "Longfellow...," he wrote, "as a poet derived his chief inspiration...from the literature and art of Europe."[159] Yet Higginson's claims for Longfellow as a literary nationalist were not extravagant ones. He did not find Longfellow the equal of Emerson or Whittier as a poet representative of American idealism, although he did think of him as a poet beloved by the common people,[160] and as one who disapproved of slavery.[161] He believed Longfellow, the stylist, mastered the classic element which a national literature shares with world literature. Less definite but still demonstrable was his case for Longfellow's use of indigenous materials. But in attempting to prove that literary nationalism was Longfellow's chief motivation as a poet, Higginson may have been led astray by his own partiality for an American literature.

Had a literary artist appeared who combined in his work the best achievements of Emerson, Whittier, and Longfellow, Higginson's conception of the ideal American writer would have been a virtual reality. With Emerson and Whittier American

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[159] William Allan Neilson, "Higginson's Longfellow," Atlantic Monthly, XC (1902), 850.

[160] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 259.

[161] Ibid., pp. 163-169.

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literature came close to being truly American, but Higginson did not expect such a sudden maturation of literary nationalism. There were hindrances to the development of a national literature which only time would overcome. Yet Higginson was confident that progress would be made. The future would be a time of fulfillment.

Higginson held that it was not the Puritan tradition, or materialism, or science that retarded the development of American literature in the post-Civil War years. Referring to the Puritans, he said:

> Their life was only historically inconsistent with what we now call culture; there was no logical antagonism; indeed that life had in it much of the material of art in its sturdiness, its enthusiasm, and truthfulness. To deny this is to see in art only something frivolous and insincere.[162]

"Overwhelming material prosperity"[163] likewise was not the obstacle it was sometimes alleged to be. The practical activity needed for the development of America was still dominating American life; the future would be the America of art:

> We have hardly yet arrived at our literature,--other things must come first; we are busy with our railroads, perfecting the vast alimentary canal by which the nation assimilates raw immigrants at the rate of a million a year. We are not yet producing, we are digesting; food now, literary composition by-and-by... .[164]

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[162] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 267.
[163] Ibid., p. 269.
[164] Ibid.,p. 272.

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As for science, it was not in opposition to literature, for, as has already been indicated in this study, Higginson viewed it as belonging to the realm of the practical. In contrast to it, literature in its purest form was intuitional or inspirational.[165]

Certain obstacles were recognized by Higginson, however. The authors themselves frequently forgot Emerson's admonition about the need for self-reliance; they often chose academic tradition as a guide instead of originality.[166] A more general hindrance was the contemporary intellectual state of the nation as a whole:

> ...every American writer must address himself to a vast audience, possessing the greatest quickness and common-sense, with but little culture; and he must command their attention as he can. This has some admirable results; he must put some life into what he writes, or his thirty million auditors will go to sleep; he must write clearly, or they will cease to follow him; must keep clear of pedantry and unknown tongues, or they will turn to some one who can address them in English. On the other hand, these same conditions tempt one to accept a low standard of execution, to substitute artifice for art.[167]

Yet Higginson believed there was every reason to be optimistic about the future:

> American literature, though its full harvest be postponed for another hundred years, is sure to come to ripeness at last. Our national development in this direction, though slow, is perfectly

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[165] Ibid., pp. 278-279.
[166] Ibid., p. 268.
[167] Atlantic Essays, p. 19.

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> healthy. There are many influences to retard, but none to distort. Even if the more ideal aims of the artist are treated with indifference, it is a frank indifference; there is no contempt, no jealousy, no call for petty manoeuvres... . There is abundant cause for strenuous effort among those who give their lives to the intellectual service of America, but there is no cause for fear. If we can only avoid incorporating superficiality into our institutions, literature will come when all is ready, and when it comes it will be of the best.[168]

America, Higginson was convinced, would be "the great civilization of the future."[169] The necessary cultural progress would be achieved, for eventually even the poorest American would be assured "opportunities such as no wealth could buy in Europe."[170] Where but in America can there be such a "leveling upward"? The prospects for a great national literature looked good to Higginson:

> Out of our strong forward-bearing American life, with its apparent complications, and its essential simplicity, is to come, some day, a purer national expression than we have yet known.[171]

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[168] Ibid., pp. 19-20.
[169] The New World and the New Book, p. 39.
[170] Atlantic Essays, p. 16.
[171] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 281.

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CHAPTER IV

Later Fiction

Twenty years Emerson's junior, gifted with a strong physique and an alert mind, Thomas Wentworth Higginson outlived by many years the Transcendental period that had done so much to endow him with an idealistic philosophy. He wrote, lectured, and published for forty-five years after the close of the Civil War. In those years, American idealism, which had spent its energy in the achievement of a great humanitarian purpose, was in danger of losing its contact with the problems, new and old, which still stood in the way of further realization of democratic aims. In those years too, the rapid growth of a materialistic philosophy threatened to obliterate the influence of such idealists as the Unitarians and the Transcendentalists, who had championed spiritual values and had sought to make clear to the individual man the need for life governed by principle. Those post-war years were also characterized by the development of a realistic emphasis in American literature--an interest in the familiar, the ordinary, the actual. By the mid-1890's this realistic approach reflected ideas common to the new biologic and economic interpretations of life and society. Higginson's evaluation of this realistic movement in literature and his views about what it should depict as typical of American life gauge well the breadth of his idealism.

Higginson was past middle age when the realists began

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to dominate American literature. He could view the new movement with historical perspective, seeing it as another example of the swing of the "literary pendulum." As such, it could go the way of any literary movement that satiated its audience:

> No reading public likes an excess of any kind of treatment. Whether idealism chokes it in gas, or propriety stiffens it with starch, or realism suffocates it with common dust, there is equally a struggle of resistance. It is of no use to say: 'Behold! this common dust is that of which sages and heroes and all human beings are alike made;' if the public is called upon to inhale too much of it there will be a rebellion. Indeed, sometimes one wonders if the realistic writers do not get a little too much of it themselves.[1]

Yet Higginson found much that he liked about the account of American life presented by the realists. His interpretation of life was essentially that of the Transcendentalists, who, it will be remembered, found the physical world important because of its spiritual significance. We are reminded of Emerson's remarks in The American Scholar when we find Higginson saying "Instead of avoiding, with Goethe, the common, das Gemeinde, American literature must freely seek the common."[2] Higginson had seen the Transcendentalists looking to the life and environment about them for their "stimulus, their scenery, their illustrations, and their properties."[3] He had also

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[1]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Literary Sectarianism," Independent, XXXIX (March 10, 1887), 1.

[2]The New World and the New Book, p. 6.

[3]Margaret Fuller Ossoli, p. 137.

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observed the fundamental relationship between Transcendental idealism and the American democratic ideal:

> And all of that early transcendental school which did so much to emancipate and nationalize American literature, did it by recognizing this same fact. From the depth of their so-called idealism they recognized the infinite value of the individual man... .
>
> And now that this early ideal movement has passed by, the far wider movement which is establishing American fiction, not in one locality alone, but on a field broad as the continent, unconsciously recognizes this one principle,--the essential dignity and worth of the individual man.[4]

The implications of this interest in the individual were perfectly clear to Higginson. He saw how such a democratic approach would cause writers to study all people, regardless of class or condition. He himself wanted to know the wheelwright as well as the "man of fashion."[5]

When a democratic society was truly a reality, the prospect for an abundance of literary material would be greater than ever:

> I affirm that democratic society, the society of the future, enriches and does not impoverish human life, and gives more, not less material for literary art. Distributing culture through all classes, it diminishes class-distinctions and develops individuality.[6]

The well-developed individual fostered by such an ideal

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[4] The New World and the New Book, pp. 8-9.

[5] Atlantic Essays, p. 65.

[6] Ibid.

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society would be a subject worthy of a writer's finest powers of analysis and representation. But any individual, regardless of the opportunities he has had to develop himself, deserves the writer's attention. In order to know human nature itself writers would have to make careful studies of individual men.[7]

The corollary, of course, to this broad democratic interest, is an interest in a national literature. In America the democratic ideal was being realized more fully than in any other country in the world. Here, more than anywhere else, Higginson held, writers recognized the "essential and inalienable value of the individual man."[8] He believed that realistic fiction should be concerned with this national theme. He stood on the side of the early realists, who as Alfred Kazin has said,

> encouraged in America that elementary nationalism, that sense of belonging to a particular time and a native way of life, which is the indispensable condition of spiritual maturity and a healthy literature.[9]

Motivated by his interest in an American literature, Higginson traced the development of realism from Charles Brockden Brown to Frank Norris. His acceptance of realism hinged on the faith that it would present a fitting account

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[7] The New World and the New Book, p. 10.

[8] Ibid., p. 11.

[9] Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York [1942]), p. 17.

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of American life and its democratic ideals. Such was the general significance or purpose he expected in realistic fiction.

He began his survey by pointing out that Charles Brockden Brown's novels are "a point of transition from Mrs. Radcliffe... to the modern novel of realism... ."[10] Brown was a careful observer, Higginson decided, finding evidence of this in Brown's detailed picture of life and manners in America at the close of the eighteenth century:

> It is a remarkable fact that even so rhetorical and melodramatic a writer as Charles Brockden Brown, our earliest romancer, has left on record a better account of the former ravages of yellow fever in our cities than can be drawn from all other sources put together. He also first introduced into our fiction the American Indian, the foreign immigrant, the Negro, even the gay cougar; indeed he expressly states it as his object... 'to exhibit a series of adventures growing out of the condition of the country.' ...The whole series of Charles Brockden Brown's novels, indeed, may be said to have a very high local and documentary value.[11]
>
> /Brown/ gives us the roving Indian; the newly arrived French musician with violin and monkey; the one-story farmhouses, where boarders are entertained at a dollar a week; the gay cougar amid caves of limestone.[12]

Charles Brockden Brown may have had "no sense of literary construction,"[13] Higginson concluded, but he "laid the

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[10] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 58.

[11] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Local Short Story," Independent, XLIV (1892), 1545.

[12] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 62.

[13] Ibid., p. 63.

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foundation for American fiction."[14]

Cooper is credited by Higginson with continuing the trend inaugurated by Brown. He saw Cooper creating, in spite of his imperfection, several kinds of realistic fiction:

> Cooper not only created American fiction, but established three several types of it--the novel of the Revolution, the sea-novel, and the novel of the American Indian. Each of these is still read and translated. ...he has created men who are full of life and vigor, and can do everything but talk simply. Yet the books live and will live and Balzac said of him that if he had painted character as he painted outward nature he would have said the last word of art.[15]

This realistic portrayal in American literature persisted and developed. Hawthorne was the " 'Pioneer of Mind' in painting the early Puritan life";[16] the national life "sings" through Walden;[17] Whittier's Snowbound is "the absolute portrayal, person by person, of New England types";[18] and Whitman "is as essentially steeped in his national life as Poe is detached from it."[19]

This interest in the "real" can be attributed largely, Higginson believed, to our developing national consciousness.

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[14] Ibid., p. 61.

[15] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "American Genius and Life," Outlook, LXII (1902), 776.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

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He was convinced that nationalism played an important role in developing interest in American things. Referring to an anthology of eighteenth century poetry, he said:

> ...aside from political allusions, there is no local coloring whatever--the birds, the flowers, are foreign and conventional, the 'lilies of the field' are Scriptural, not American, and it is doubtful whether the 'Robin Redbreast,' to whom one poem is addressed, is the home-bred or the English bird.[20]

It was in fiction that the writers chose to draw their realistic pictures, and in it, after the Civil War, Higginson found abundant local coloring. He approved of it highly, finding it highly preferable to "various literary whims and extremes."[21] His instinct for unity and form caused him to prefer the short story to longer narratives: it had "no sub-division of interest."[22] Local life constituted the subject matter for such prose fiction:

> It may be accepted as an axiom that prose fiction occupies the place, for this generation, that was held by dramatic writing in the Elizabethan period. This being the case, the test of a live literature, here and now, is that it should produce, in great numbers and over a wide surface, authors whose works shall all be based on a careful study of the actual life around them. Even the most purely ideal authors must have this local life for a basis, as we find even in Hawthorne much delicate delineation of the actual world around him.[23]

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[20]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "A Landmark in American Literature," Independent, XLII (1890), 409.

[21]Book and Heart, p. 60.

[22]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Local Short Story," Independent, XLIV (1892), 1544.

[23]Ibid., p. 1545.

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Higginson took note that many of the new fiction writers were women.[24] He saw them as legitimate pioneers in the establishment of an indigenous literature. As might be expected, he was quite sympathetic to the moral significance they found in the life they depicted. Thus he said approvingly that "Miss Wilkins has produced a series of moral pictures, as true and as terse as anything in literature...," also noting that Saxe Holme (Helen Hunt Jackson) had an "ideal tone."[25] Yet he never would have agreed with Clifton J. Furness that women were the real creators of an indigenous American literature.[26] It is quite true that he was sensitive to such traditionally feminine qualities as propriety, sympathy, and frailty, and that he was sympathetic to sentimentality. He knew such emotional distortions were antithetical to a realistic portrayal of feeling, but he felt there was a legitimate reason for such "tender introspection in the region of the heart."[27] It was "the slight overplus and excess of youthful emotion,"[28] common to the early stages of an individual's emotional development. It seemed to Higginson to be a characteristic of mid-nineteenth century literature and he attributed its prominence to the emotional free-

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Clifton J. Furness, "Introduction," The Genteel Female (New York, 1931), xv-xlv.

[27] The New World and the New Book, p. 178.

[28] Ibid., p. 184.

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dom of transcendentalism (an influence still effective in those who had lived through that period).[29]

However much he himself had been influenced by sentimentalism, he preferred a more accurate, more balanced picture of life. In 1866 he asked, "Can it be possible that any literature of the world now yields sentimental novels so vague and immature as those which America brings forth?"[30] He believed that the passing away of "this atmosphere of exaggerated feeling"[31] augured well for literature, and he felt that Dickens, although often sentimental himself, did more than anyone else to "exorcise" sentimentalism, "and, whatever its merits, he rendered the world a service in that act of grace."[32]

Higginson viewed the decline of sentimentalism quite objectively, reporting in 1887 that the period of its greatest influence had passed:

> At a private charitable reading, held lately in Boston, it was noticed that the younger part of the audience responded but slightly in the way of sympathy to Dr. Holmes's poem on the Moore Festival, while to the older guests the allusions seemed all very familiar and even touching. The waning of sympathy for Moore and his "Irish Melodies" simply shows the diminished hold of the sentimental upon us, taking that work to represent a certain rather melodramatic self-consciousness, a tender

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[29] The New World and the New Book, p. 183.

[30] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Review of Esperance by Meta Lander," Atlantic Monthly, XVII (1866), 525.

[31] The New World and the New Book, p. 182.

[32] Ibid., p. 183.

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> introspection in the region of the heart, a kind of studious cosseting of one's finer feelings. Perhaps it is not generally recognized how much more abundant was this sort of thing forty years ago than now, and how it moulded the very temperaments of those who were born into it. Byron had as much to do with creating it as any one in England; but more probably it goes back to Rousseau in France... .[33]

Higginson also believed that the advent of realism was helping greatly to clear up what he once called "the vexed question of morality in art."[34] He held that many writers (especially pre-Civil War ones) had not achieved a satisfactory unity between the ethical and the aesthetic; too often the moral took precedence over the aesthetic, and distorted the form or mode of execution. A literary work should have moral significance; the difficulty lay, Higginson thought, in not presenting that significance properly. The moral could become a literary defect when it was superfluous--especially when it was so simple or obvious that it required no statement or reiteration, yet was stressed or pointed out nevertheless.[35] Higginson contrasted Bryant, Whittier, and Longfellow's use of such obvious didacticism and pointed out its dangers:

> /Longfellow/ may have learned much, though not

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[33] Ibid., pp. 178-179 (The essay here referred to was first published in the Independent in 1887 /Vol. XXXIX, p. 1409/).

[34] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 58.

[35] Contemporaries, p. 68.

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> immediately, through the warning unconsciously given by Bryant, against the perils of undue moralizing. Bryant's early poem, "To a Water Fowl," was as profound in feeling and as perfect in structure as anything of Longfellow's, up to the last verse, which some profane critic compared to a tin kettle of moralizing, tied to the legs of the flying bird. Whittier's poems had almost always some such appendage, and he used to regret in later life that he had not earlier been contented to leave his moral for the reader to draw, or in other words, to lop off habitually the last verse of each poem.[36]

Higginson had no sympathy for the writer who dwelt disproportionately upon the moral element, striving to drive it home to the reader. Thus, in writing of Jean Ingelow's work, he said:

> ...she has no serious drawback except a very prominent and unpleasant moral tendency, which is, indeed, made so conspicuous that one rather resents it, and feels a slight reaction in favor of vice. One is disposed to apply to so oppressively didactic an author the cautious criticism of Talleyrand on his female friend,--'She is insufferable, but that is her only fault.' For this demonstrativeness of ethics renders it necessary for her to paint her typical sinner in colors of total blackness, and one seldom finds, even among mature offenders, such unmitigated scoundrels as she exhibits in their teens. They do not move or talk like human beings, but like lay figures into which certain specified sins have been poured. This is an artistic as well as ethical error.[37]

But no matter how skilfully handled, the "overt and visible moral"[38] --frequently called the "guideboard"--was not

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[36] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, pp. 133-134.

[37] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Review of Studies for Stories by Jean Ingelow," Atlantic Monthly, XV (1865), 379.

[38] Book and Heart, pp. 7-8.

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advocated by Higginson. He saw it as outmoded, even if its passing brought with it the risk that ethical significance might go unnoticed by careless readers.[39] The moral element was not to be eliminated, but it should be implied by the literary work and its discovery and interpretation left to the reader.

Hawthorne, Higginson held, was one of the first American writers to achieve a satisfactory union of morality and art. He called attention to the part played by realism in achieving this synthesis:

> You place yourself by his side to look with him at his characters, and gradually share with him the conviction that they must be real. Then, when he has you thus in possession, he calls your attention to the profound ethics involved in the tale, and yet does it so gently that you never think of the moral as being obtrusive.[40]

Thus it is not simply for the sake of artistic proportion that the moral should be abandoned as an appendage: a more potent force than any appeal to artistic standards was the new interest in the realistic portrayal of life. Abroad, Flaubert and Tolstoi had gone far beyond Hawthorne: Madame Bovary's moral was powerful, but it was not indicated, nor was the moral or theme of Anna Karenina.[41] The "guideboard" was passing because it had no place in realistic fiction: "...this change comes

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[39] Ibid., p. 5.
[40] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 8.
[41] Book and Heart, pp. 6-7.

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simply from the fact that fiction is drawing nearer to life."[42] In real life a moral is implied, inferred.[43] "Let the picture only be well drawn," Higginson averred, "and the moral will take care of itself, never fear."[44] Thus he excused the realists, quite gladly, from the use of the "guideboard" (which he felt was an inartistic device anyway), asking only that their work have a reasonably plain moral and "stop short of undesirable materials."[45]

Higginson's views about the effect of the realistic attitude upon sentimentalism and didacticism seem to have been accurate. The realists were too busy depicting their own localities to concern themselves for very long with sentimentality or the "guideboard". Writers of local fiction found a wealth of material at hand:

> The close of the War and the rapid settlement of the Western country has given...a vast width to the area of available material; the rapid multiplication of the portable kodak has scarcely surpassed the swift growth of local writers, each apparently having the same equipment of directness and vigor. All the varied elements of our society are being rapidly sought out and exhibited.[46]

All localities and types of American life interested Higginson, and he suggested some specific ones himself which

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[42] Ibid., p. 3.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., p. 43.
[45] Ibid., p. 11.
[46] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Local Short Story," Independent, XLIV (1892), 1545.

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he thought had been overlooked. For example, he considered it "surprising that the Irish-American life of our large cities has as yet got so little into fiction."[47] Yet the field of local fiction was steadily becoming more inclusive. He noted, with satisfaction, the rising interest in the Southern scene,[48] and mentioned the contributions of Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, Richard Malcolm Johnston, George Washington Cable, and Grace King. New England and the West were not the only areas to receive detailed attention. What he believed to be the first requirement of a lasting literature was being realized:

> In a comparatively new country, especially, the first essential of a permanent literature--more essential at first than great works of history, philosophy or poetry--is a wide multiplicity of works of really admirable local fiction. This is precisely what we have accomplished.[49]

That he achieved good perspective in judging individual local colorists is revealed by his opinion of Bret Harte, an evaluation in keeping with present day opinion:

> Bret Harte...made California his own, but forfeited his hold upon the soil by transplantation: and having once hit the mark, spends the rest of his life firing in the air.[50]

Other local colorists whom he appraised with considerable

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[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

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accuracy were Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Miss Jewett, he pointed out, excelled in depicting the "more cultivated and ancestral aspects of New England life."[51] He called Miss Wilkins' characters "wonders of keen delineation," but he was not reconciled to the grimness of the life she depicted.[52] Like Howells, he saw wholesomeness and happiness as qualities typically American. He believed that Alice Brown, whose realism dealt with a "wholesome enjoyment of life," met this standard better than did either Miss Jewett or Miss Wilkins.[53] He foresaw a prominence for her as a local color writer which she never attained.

Mark Twain, Higginson thought, was important for his local fiction. His "reckless robustness" was his chief virtue.[54] With The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn he had helped found "an original Western literature":[55]

> The whole local atmosphere, the tragic vividness with which heroic figures appear before us, rustic, even boyish, alive for a few hours, then disappearing with the same quiet abruptness in death; a whole family made interesting, even charming, to us, then vanishing mercilessly in a meaningless border feud; this is a distinct step forward in American literature, and cannot be put out of sight either by too ambitious efforts like his Joan of Arc or by free and easy journal-

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Book and Heart, p. 61.

[53] Ibid., p. 62.

[54] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 246.

[55] Ibid., p. 248.

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istic extravaganzas like Innocents Abroad.[56]

Such writers as these, Higginson believed, brought local color writing to the peak of its development. But local fiction was simply a step toward a more inclusive picture of American life:

> We have reached that point in our national development where we are getting the local accent strongly reflected in our literature, and thus preparing the way for something wider and more comprehensively national by and by.[57]

In the work of William Dean Howells Higginson hoped to find this broader kind of realism. Howells' championship of realism had not failed to attract Higginson's attention. Here, perhaps, was the realist who would go beyond local color into work more typically national.

At first, however, Higginson saw Howells as principally a skilful writer of local fiction, lacking the breadth necessary to qualify as a realist representative of the nation. It was not that Howells lacked literary grace. In 1880 Higginson concluded:

> He has no rival in halftints, in modulations, in subtile phrases that touch the edge of an assertion and yet stop short of it.[58]

It was his limited range that Higginson deplored:

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Local Short Story," Independent, XLIV (1892), 1545.

[58] Short Studies of American Authors, pp. 33-34.

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> He is like a skater who executes a hundred graceful curves within the limits of a pool a few yards square. Miss Austen, the novelist, once described her art as a little bit of ivory, on which she produced small effect after much labor. She underrated her own skill, as the comparison in some respects underrates that of Howells; but his field is--or has until lately seemed to be--the little bit of ivory.[59]

And Higginson's evaluation of Howells in 1880 shows that he himself preferred a much broader kind of realism than the editor of the Atlantic Monthly had thus far achieved:

> This is attributing to him only what he has been careful to claim for himself. He tells his methods very frankly, and his first literary principle has been to look away from great passions, and rather to elevate the commonplace by minute touches. Not only does he prefer this, but he does not hesitate to tell us sometimes, half jestingly, that it is the only thing to do. 'As in literature the true artist will shun the use even of real events if they are of an improbable character, so the sincere observer of man will not desire to look upon his heroic or occasional phases, but will seek him in his habitual moods of vacancy and tiresomeness.' He may not mean to lay this down as a canon of universal authority, but he accepts it himself; and he accepts with it the risk involved of a too-limited and microscopic range. That he has finally escaped this peril, is due to the fact that his method went, after all, deeper than he admitted: he was not merely a good-natured observer...but he had thoughts and purposes, something to protest against, and something to say.[60]

Also in 1880, in reviewing Howells' Undiscovered Country, Higginson praised his craftsmanship, his use of local color, and his depiction of the depths of character, and expressed

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[59] Ibid., p. 34.
[60] Ibid., pp. 33-34.

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faith "such as we have never before felt, in the steady maturing and promise of his rare powers."[61]

Eleven years later, in an address before the Nineteenth Century Club of New York City, Higginson evaluated Howells' contribution to a national literature concerned with "the essential and inalienable value of the individual man":[62]

> I hasten to add, what I should not always have felt justified in saying, that this American tendency comes to its highest point and is best indicated in the later work of Mr. Howells. ...the earlier work of Mr. Howells--that is, everything before 'The Rise of Silas Lapham,' 'Annie Kilburn,' and 'The Hazard of New Fortunes'-- falls now into its right place; its alleged thinness becomes merely that of the painter's sketches and studies before his maturer work begins. ...It is impossible to deny that he as a critic has proved himself sometimes narrow, and has rejected with too great vehemence what lay outside of his especial domain... . But as he has become touched more and more with the enthusiasm of humanity, he has grown better than his reasons, far better than his criticisms; and it is with him and with the school he represents that the hope of American literature just now rests. The reason why he finds no delicate shading or gradation of character unimportant is that he represents the dignity and importance of the individual man.[63]

Higginson, in this same address, called Howells "a student of life, who painted with the skill that Scott revered in Miss Austen, but not /and this is worth noting in view of the 1880 opinion/ on the two inches of ivory that Miss Austen

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[61]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Review of Howells' Undiscovered Country," Scribner's Monthly, XX (1880), 794.

[62]The New World and the New Book, p. 11.

[63]Ibid., pp. 12-14.

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chose."[64] Instead, Howells' canvas was "large enough for the future of America."[65] He found in him a "sense of form and symmetry," "graphic characterization," and an inclusiveness befitting a national writer.[66] He was, Higginson concluded, a painter of character and life, and his contribution to American fiction might well parallel Emerson's in poetry and prose:

> Emerson set free our poetry, our prose; Howells is setting free our fiction; he himself is as yet only half out of the chrysalis, but the wings are there.[67]

Yet in 1903, Higginson permitted his earlier views to appear in A Reader's History of American Literature. Howells never quite reached the breadth that Higginson expected of the realists:

> In one sense the novels of Mr. Howells have, like those of many other writers of Western origin, proved a disappointment. Instead of bringing with them a largeness, as of the prairies, the genius finally developed has been that of the miniature artist... . It is not unusual to find such superfine developments of art attempted in rough, new countries; but they cannot be said to represent the life of which they may be, by reaction, the outcome.[68]

In 1897 Higginson looked upon realism as having already reached maturity; indeed he even suggested that perhaps the

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[64] Ibid., p. 15.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] A Reader's History of American Literature, pp. 251-252.

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literary pendulum was swinging away from it.[69] Even at what he had considered the peak of its achievement--its report of American life prior to the trend toward naturalism--it had failed to meet his aesthetic standards.

Higginson believed that the technique, or execution, as Henry James sometimes called it,[70] which would insure the creation of a significant picture of life depended chiefly upon skillful portrayal of character and adequacy of plot. Thus, form was not a matter of external adornment or of accurate description. Rather it was a unity in the piece of fiction which could be achieved chiefly through character development. In this way the writer could "catch the flavor of real life."[71]

It was axiomatic with him that the presentation of a relatively simple character provided no real challenge to a writer's ability. The complex portrayals were the ones he admired. He was pleased to observe Henry James dealing with profound emotions, depicting "characters and situations which could not be cramped, at last, within the conventional limits of a stage ending."[72]

In mastery of character portrayal, Higginson believed,

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[69] Book and Heart, p. 10.

[70] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," American Critical Essays, XIXth and XXth Centuries, ed. Norman Foerster (London [1930]), p. 164.

[71] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 198.

[72] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 59.

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few realists possessed a skill comparable to that of James. Their great weakness was their tendency to concentrate on types, failing in their attempts to create complex portraits:

> Bret Harte and his successor, Hamlin Garland, handle admirably the types they knew in early life, but the moment they attempt to delineate a highly bred woman the curtain rises on a creaking doll in starched petticoats. Few, indeed, of our authors can venture to portray, what would seem not so impossible, an every-day gentleman or lady.[73]

Local types were becoming stereotypes. Bret Harte had contributed the California gambler, Howells, the Bostonian, and many writers (even James!) were experimenting with the New Yorker, a typical character, whom Higginson dubbed "Jones of New York," who "fears nothing and can do everything"--even in the wildest regions he has his dress suit along, he is loved by women everywhere, and he always knows all the train schedules.[74] In this gallery of types, the highly developed, complex individual was not to be found. This deficiency, Higginson thought, was either due to lack of experience or to failure to possess the necessary skill to depict such a character.[75]

This concentration upon types made Higginson fear that characterization was becoming a static thing, showing no

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[73] Book and Heart, pp. 64-65.

[74] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The New Yorker in Literature," Independent, XL (1888), 898-899.

[75] Book and Heart, p. 64.

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growth or depth in the individual depicted. Such superficial sketching, he believed, was a threat to what had been established as an important element in fiction: the plot. He deplored the fact that Howells and other realists had proposed the "abolition of the plot,"[76] and he argued for its preservation, basing his case upon the very thing the realists held to be their particular field: life itself.

> Character in real life is a far more absorbing study than character in fiction; and when it comes to plot, fiction is nowhere in comparison. Toss a skein of thread into the sea, and within twenty-four hours the waves and the floating seaweed will have tangled it into a knot more perplexing than the utmost effort of your hands can weave; and so the complex plots of life are wound by the currents of life itself, not by the romancers. If life thus provides them, they are a part of life, and must not be omitted when there is a pretence at its delineation.[77]

He defined plot as "the development of character."[78] To illustrate its importance he pointed to Hawthorne's skillful portrayal of change in Arthur Dimmesdale, concluding that a description of Dimmesdale would never have sufficed by itself.[79]

Higginson's insistence upon skillful portrayal, wholeness, unity, testifies to his aesthetic concern for form as a technique going far beyond outward polish and reportorial

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[76] The New World and the New Book, p. 135.
[77] Ibid., p. 141.
[78] Ibid., p. 137.
[79] Ibid., pp. 137-138.

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authenticity.

The appearance of the naturalists among American realists at the close of the century doubtless had much to do with causing Higginson to decide that realism had reached its zenith as a literary trend and had begun its decline. But the realists were soon to pay less attention than ever to admonitions about form. They were abandoning their belief in human dignity and deciding instead that the negative view of man as a victim of environment and instinct was a truer one. Stephen Crane and Frank Norris were the two writers influenced by deterministic ideas who completed their writing careers during Higginson's later years, and it is from his remarks about them (and his significant silence too) that it is possible to predicate his reaction to the naturalists. Jack London did much writing before Higginson's death in 1911, it is true, but to Higginson he must generally have been too artless to merit consideration; Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie was not considered salable until 1912. Thus the naturalists were not exerting their greatest influence during Higginson's lifetime. In such transition figures as Crane and Norris, he found talent and themes he could commend. Whether he would have found redeeming qualities in such a consistent naturalist as Dreiser is extremely doubtful; Dreiser's work, practically in toto, was in opposition to Higginson's philosophy.

That Higginson could never have accepted naturalism is evident from his views on science and its relation to litera-

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ture. He was not antagonistic to science, but he did not believe that it should intrude into the realm of literature. The account of life he felt to be valid was one showing the individual fashioning his own destiny. The idea that man in a democracy had his life formed for him by such factors as environment and instinct was the antithesis of all Higginson believed in.

He did not live to see science exert its greatest influence over American literature, but he was well aware of many problems implicit in its astounding growth. He recognized the nineteenth century as the "age of science," and concluded that "beneficent or baleful, saving or slaying, its sway has come."[80] Literature was in danger of being put aside as a waste of time,[81] and the "scientific style" threatened to replace literary style entirely.[82]

Although it was his hope that a more favorable balance between literature and science would soon be achieved, he reconciled himself to the prominence of science by reasoning that scientific progress must precede artistic progress.[83] Perhaps the great achievements of science in developing America would make Americans want to do great things in lit-

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[80] Book and Heart, p. 30.
[81] Atlantic Essays, p. 337.
[82] Ibid., p. 338.
[83] Ibid., p. 64.

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erature too.[84] Higginson's respect for science is thus obviously great. He saw that it had transformed the world's thought and action and he linked its advance with the progress of democracy.[85] His optimism blinded him to the injustices which came with the exploitation of natural resources; he says nothing of problems which the practical application of science put in the path of democracy.

Yet it was not to applied science, "mere technological training,"[86] that Higginson paid so much respect. It was pure or abstract science that appealed to him, but he agreed with Edmund Clarence Stedman that its knowledge held a place secondary to that of the literary man.[87] Scientific genius, he thought, "almost partakes of the poetic quality."[88] The implication of such a statement is clear; the scientist cannot match the artist's insight:

> ...however high we may rank the scientific exploration of nature, we should rank literature higher still, as bringing us nearer to the human mind itself.[89]

The shortcomings of a Darwin call attention to the more comprehensive talents of an Emerson:

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Book and Heart, pp. 28-29.

[86] Atlantic Essays, p. 8.

[87] Edmund Clarence Stedman, The Nature and Elements of Poetry (Boston [1892]), p. 33.

[88] Contemporaries, p. 285.

[89] Atlantic Essays, p. 339.

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> The mere record of Darwin's own life shows how large a part of man's highest mental action became inert in him. He ceased to care for the spheres of thought in which Emerson chiefly lived, while on the other hand, the tendencies and results of Darwin's thought were always an object of interest to Emerson.[90]

The "spheres of thought in which Emerson chiefly lived" were those which Higginson defined as belonging to "a world outside of science."[91] This is the realm of intuition or inspiration, "a realm...not subject to processes or measurable by tests":[92]

> Science can be duplicated or gone over again, or it can be dropped and taken up again at the same point. It can be renewed. The highest forms of literature come we know not whence and go we know not whither; and this accounts for instances in such work where even one verse remains in the memory of mankind while all the rest is lost. ... Poetry is not a part of science, but it is, as Wordsworth once said, 'the antithesis of science;' it is a world outside. The name of this world, we may conclude, is literature.[93]

In view of the inability of the scientific method to render a valid report of the ideal, the emotional, and the poetic, it seemed clear to Higginson that there was no cause for science to become a "fetish." In 1873, he wrote,

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[90] The New World and the New Book, p. 126.

[91] Book and Heart, pp. 28-40.

[92] Ibid., p. 33.

[93] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Literature as a Pursuit," Critic, XLVII (1905), 167.

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quite prophetically:

> Even clergymen have now learned to speak with distrust of the 'theologic method' and with respect of the 'scientific method.' But I think we must steadily remember that there is more in man than the scientific method yet knows how to reach; and the dogmatism of science may be just as shallow and hasty as that of theology.[94]

Yet literature and science are not contradictory, "antithetical" though they may be. There is need for the knowledge that each affords: "is there not room in the world," Higginson asked, "for both science and art, use and beauty?...We are outgrowing the foolish fear that science is taking poetry away from the facts of nature... ."[95] Higginson's attempt at compromise was never more clearly indicated than in this plea for the proper recognition of both art and science. Yet his world, like that of Wordsworth (who had similar views about science and poetry) remained essentially "ideal," with the poet standing as a "rock of defence for human nature: an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love."[96] It would be inconceivable to such an idealist that the materialistic philosophy of the naturalists could possibly have a rightful place in belles-lettres.

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[94]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Fetich of Science," Index, IV (March 22, 1873), 139.

[95]Atlantic Essays, p. 336.

[96]William Wordsworth, "Poetry and Poetic Diction," English Critical Essays, Nineteenth Century, ed. Edmund D. Jones, (London: Oxford Univ. Press [1935?]), p. 19.

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Therefore it is not surprising that Higginson never once mentioned Stephen Crane's Maggie, A Girl of the Streets. Both in content and in style, that book is obviously out of keeping with his standards. In The Red Badge of Courage, however, he found much that impressed him. Perhaps his own Civil War experiences made him particularly sympathetic toward this novel. He saw no implications of determinism in it; he praised it as a remarkable realistic account of a soldier's experience in battle. He regarded it as "a cross section of the daily life of the raw enlisted man."[97] "No one," he wrote, "except Tolstoi, within my knowledge, has brought out the daily life of war so well."[98] He praised Crane's skill in creating atmosphere, noting his imaginative reconstruction of the "real tumult and tatters" of the soldier's existence.[99] "It really seems," he declared, "a touch of that marvellous intuitive quality which for want of a better name we call genius."[100] The book has the merit of universality too; the characters are not simply a unique gallery of portraits whose counterparts were peculiar to a single regiment at Chancellorsville:

> The very merit of this book is that in dealing with his men the author offers, within this general range, all the essential types of

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[97] Book and Heart, p. 44.
[98] Ibid., p. 41.
[99] Ibid., p. 42.
[100] Ibid., p. 43.

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> character--the man who boasts and the man who is humble--the man who thinks he may be frightened and is not, and the man who does not expect to be, but is. For his main character he selects a type to be found in every regiment--the young man who does not know himself, who first stumbles into cowardice, to his own amazement, and then is equally amazed at stumbling into courage; who begins with skulking, and ends by taking a flag.[101]

This story, Higginson felt, represented his kind of realism. Its moral would take care of itself;[102] it was first of all a "bit of war photography" which cast a strong spell:

> ...the test of the book is in the way it holds you. I only know that whenever I take it up I find myself reading it over and over, as I do Tolstoi's Cossacks, and find it as hard to put down. ...Even the slipshod grammar seems a part of the breathless life and action.[103]

In the work of Frank Norris, Higginson also found realism to his liking--but he repudiated every passage that echoed the naturalism of Zola. He did not attack Zolaistic fiction, as did Thomas Bailey Aldrich; he simply could not reconcile it with his democratic idealism. Naturalism, to Higginson, was not an indigenous kind of realism. Why should we, who have declared our literary independence, follow the models of France and Russia and falsify our report of American life? Frank Norris and Hamlin Garland were both guilty of so looking abroad in their attempts to depict life in the

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[101] Ibid., pp. 44-45.
[102] Ibid., p. 43.
[103] Ibid., pp. 45-46.

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Middle West and West:

> Each of these writers set out with the stated intention of breaking away from the literary traditions of the East. They did, so far as the Eastern states of North America are concerned; but they did not hesitate to go still farther east, to France and Russia, for their models. Mr. Garland's earlier tales have much of the ironical compactness of deMaupassant, and Mr. Norris's novels could not have been written but by a worshiper of Zola. It cannot be expected that the spirit of the West will find perfect expression under such a method. If America cannot find utterance in terms of England, she certainly cannot in terms of France. There are certain racial prescriptions of taste and style which cannot be safely ignored.[104]

Yet both these writers could write vividly of American life, and their accounts often held Higginson's interest as closely as The Red Badge of Courage had done. He praised Main Travelled Roads for its "vigor of characterization /which/ carries one away from the first moment to the last...the figures seem absolutely real."[105] He found much merit in the content of Norris' novels:

> Apart from the question of method, the substance of Mr. Norris's books is of exceptional power, and his early death deprived not only the West, but the whole country, of one who promised more even than he had accomplished.
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> It may be that Mr. Norris's book /The Pit/ will live when the tremendous operations of the wheat pit are forgotten.[106]

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[104] A Reader's History of American Literature, pp. 254-255.

[105] Ibid., p. 254.

[106] Ibid., pp. 255-256.

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There seems to be nothing but silence about such books as McTeague. Like Crane's Maggie, they simply go unmentioned. Such fiction served only to detract from the picture of America that Higginson was convinced was the true one, a picture of a strong, young nation busily engaged in laying the necessary material foundations for the cultural development of all its citizens. He was even so sanguine as to observe: "...wealth naturally takes the lead upon a path which tends, on the whole, upward."[107] At times he had his doubts about the advantages of material progress,[108] but his idealism never faltered so much that he could come to see Americans as victims of circumstance and instinct.

In the last decade a reaction against the way realistic writers have been depicting American life has become increasingly apparent. Critics have been propounding views similar to Higginson's about the purpose and the aesthetics of realistic writing in this country.

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[107] Part of a Man's Life, p. 111.

[108] Evidence that his optimism could be ruffled is seen in the following ironic passage from his review of Samuel Bowles' Across the Continent: A Summer's Journey to the Rocky Mountains, the Mormons, and the Pacific States: "...a thoroughly American book,--American in the sense of today, if not according to the point of view of the millenium. It is American in its vast applications of arithmetic; in the facility with which it brings the breadth of a continent within the limits of a summer's ride; in the eloquence which rises to sublimity over mining stock, and dwindles to the verge of commonplace before unmarketable natural beauties" (Atlantic Monthly, XXVII [1867], 524).

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For several decades the majority of the realistic writers in America have chosen to disregard an optimistic interpretation of the American scene, choosing instead the opposite extreme, the pessimistic view. The question is now being asked if the latter view is the more representative. The idealists, for all their optimism, are being seen again as better reporters of the national life. Higginson's ethical idealism, for example, sanguine though it was, was positive, not negative. It gave him a coherent, meaningful view of American life. It caused him to have faith in "the essential and inalienable value of the individual man,"[109] and to ask that the national literature be true to this democratic theme.

Few fiction writers since Higginson's time have accepted his premise that American life has merit, or have maintained as he did that a positive theme is characteristic of our thought. Van Wyck Brooks--who, in his earlier works at least, would have had little sympathy for Higginson's ethical idealism--has pointed out that our contemporary writers lack the "mood of health, will, courage, faith in human nature."[110] Pessimism has replaced optimism as the dominant temperament:

> The temperamental cards of our time are all stacked in favour of despair, and a somewhat sterile despair. One error that an optimist makes destroys his whole case, while a pessimist can

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[109] The New World and the New Book, p. 11.

[110] Van Wyck Brooks, On Literature Today (New York, 1941), p. 13.

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> get away with murder. It seems as if our writers passively wallowed in misery, calling it fate; as if the most powerful writers from James Joyce to Hemingway, from Eliot of The Waste Land to Eugene O'Neill and Theodore Dreiser, were bent on proving that life is a dark little pocket.[111]

He sees such writers as Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Farrell delighting "in kicking their world to pieces, as if civilization were all a pretence and everything noble a humbug."[112]

Bernard DeVoto has protested against the "repudiation" of American life by the writers of the 1920's, holding that

> There is something intrinsically absurd in the image of a literary man informing a hundred and twenty million people that their ideals are base, their beliefs unworthy, their ideas vulgar, their institutions corrupt, and, in sum, their civilization too trivial to engage that literary man's respect.[113]

DeVoto concludes that the account of our culture given by these writers was utterly false: "Never in any country or any age had writers so misrepresented their culture, never had they been so unanimously wrong."[114]

Professor Howard Mumford Jones has also seen the fallacy of attempting to believe in the democratic ideal if our literature presents men merely as stupid victims of instinct and circumstance:

> When American readers are continually assailed

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[111] Ibid., p. 14.
[112] Ibid., p. 15.
[113] Bernard DeVoto, The Literary Fallacy (Boston, 1944), p. 150.
[114] Ibid., p. 167.

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> through the imagination with pictures of life which in fact deny that intelligent living is anywhere possible, they may find it difficult to keep faith with the democratic ideal.[115]

Mr. Elmer Davis has recently pointed out a danger inherent in an American literature that ignores the values that belong to a free people and concentrates on reporting weaknesses. American writers have presented a picture of a "nation rotten to the core, in which the wicked flourish while the righteous are trodden underfoot (or worse, ignored)."[116] Since that is not the true picture, yet is accepted as such abroad, the consequences can be serious:

> If American writers faithfully set down what they saw, what difference does it make that they didn't see some other things? Only this, as Gerald Johnson lately remarked in The New York Times Book Review--that certain men in Europe, and certain other men in Asia, mistook the literary picture (and the somewhat different picture presented by the American movies) for the total picture; and thus were misled into 'a grossly inaccurate estimate of the situation.' That inaccurate estimate molded their fate, finally and decisively; but it also had a considerable and unpleasant influence on the fate of all the rest of us. And, unfortunately, there are signs that some other men in Europe are making a similarly inaccurate estimate now.[117]

The faults of the present-day American novel have been well analyzed by Professor Sophus K. Winther, who sees the

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[115]Howard Mumford Jones, Ideas in America (Cambridge [Mass.], 1944), p. 180.

[116]Elmer Davis, "History Without Ideas," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXII (Aug. 6, 1949), 66.

[117]Ibid.

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novel as "sick"--its task of "smelling out the evils of American society" has been too much for it.[118] He diagnoses the novel's "sickness" in terms reminiscent of Higginson and other idealists:

> Every great age in literature has had its heritage of critical principles, and in addition has made its own contribution to theory. This age of novelists has none. It has experimented with a technique devoted to the exploration of the subconscious, an idea borrowed from Freud and Jung. This has brought into the novel a few examples of depth and originality, both in technique and subject matter, but since it was not supported by a theory of fiction nor based upon a philosophy that involved a concept of man in relation to all aspects of his life and the world, it resulted for the most part in bizarre experiments.[119]

Contrast the situation during the Romantic Period, says Professor Winther:

> The Romantic Period was rich in critical theory. It was theory that rebelled in certain aspects against the past, while at the same time it set forth a positive doctrine for the young writers to follow. Again the emphasis involved not only man's crisis at the moment but his destiny. It was critical theory steeped in philosophy, history, and art. The man who aspired to compete with Shelley, Byron, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats realized that he must be a man of learning, and that his program must be something more complex than the salvation of a particular group of unfortunate men and women in specific locale.[120]

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[118] Sophus K. Winther, "The Sick American Novel," Pacific Spectator, I (1947), 105.

[119] Ibid., pp. 110-111.

[120] Ibid., p. 112.

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Bernard DeVoto also gives advice that reflects views similar to Higginson's:

> Either literature deals honestly with the basic experiences in which all men may see themselves, or else it is only a mannered diversion practised by the impaired and of interest only to the leisure moments of those who are whole. Either it is a man and a brother speaking to men and brothers, speaking of the things which all share and are subject to, or else it is only a private titillation. Well over a century ago Ralph Waldo Emerson ordered the American writer to his job--to the meal in the firkin, the milk in the pan. To know what it was that had appeared upon the earth, the new man, this American. To search his heart, his mind, his vision, his memory. Only in obeying that command has American literature ever found reality.[121]

Thus a view of American life similar to Higginson's is being sought today by critics of our fiction. Higginson, it is well to reiterate in conclusion, remained, consistently, an idealist of the Unitarian and Transcendental schools. Personal responsibility never yielded to conformity, nor to determinism, in his ethic. He was, in short, a romanticist, interested in many of the same things the realists espoused: humanity, nature, everyday life. But literature to him was never simply a matter of objective reporting, as the realists maintained. He expected the fiction writers of the post-Civil War years to concern themselves, as Emerson and Thoreau had done, with the great theme of individual development. That, to him, was the theme of the national literature. His insist-

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[121] The Literary Fallacy, p. 174.

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ence upon aesthetic qualities in that literature was an important corollary to the theme he championed. The critics just quoted are making similar demands upon the realists of today.

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CHAPTER V

Experimentation in Poetry

Higginson achieved a breadth in his evaluation of the post-Civil War fiction which he never equaled in his opinion of the new trends in poetry. This is due, primarily, to the fact that traditional precepts about artistic form did not assume the prominence in his thinking about fiction that they assumed in his judgments of poetry. Fiction, as a relatively new genre, had developed few traditional modes of expression. The themes of realistic fiction were chiefly contemporary ones. Thus American fiction appealed to that aspect of Higginson's thought which favored new trends and new ideas. Although he wanted fiction to be artistic, he accepted no traditional or foreign works as suitable models for the writers who were seeking to portray American life in the novel and the short story.

With poetry, the situation was quite different. Higginson's acceptance of traditional concepts about poetic form imposed limitations upon his judgments which he never overcame. The difficulty hinged upon the over-simplification evident in his critical principles. Despite his occasional talk of organic unity, he accepted the less complex view that there was a distinction between form and content. Although he stressed the value of inspiration, he held ideas about poetic form which stemmed from the neo-classic tradition. He looked upon form as a discipline; it was imposed upon the inspired idea. He was not reconciled to the romantic

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view that the poet's thought would achieve its own appropriate form. His inability to make a satisfactory compromise between the conflicting standards of genius and form became increasingly apparent as he sought to analyze the work of the three post-Civil War poets who showed the greatest divergence from tradition: Walt Whitman, Sidney Lanier, and Emily Dickinson.

The basis of the difficulty he had in evaluating these post-Civil War experimenters can be seen in his judgments of such poets as Lowell and Emerson. Whether he was concerned with Brahmin or Transcendentalist, Higginson emphasized his belief that a poet was to impose form upon inspiration. Inspiration might indeed be more important, but, nevertheless, it was to be enhanced by being fitted with pleasing form.

As early as 1868, Higginson pointed out weaknesses in Lowell's mastery of expression.[1] His poetry was weakened by "cumbrous and involved structure," and by "clumsy adjectives." He had also been led into the error of mixing heterogeneous materials and techniques. Thus in the Vision of Sir Launfal the landscape is that of New England, but the knights and castles are those of the Middle Ages. Likewise, in the Biglow Papers, Parson Wilbur "sometimes writes Addisonian English, sometimes becomes Cotton Mather, and sometimes...perpetuates

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[1]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Live Americans, Lowell," Independent, XX (Aug. 20, 1868), 1.

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the most flagrant and unmitigated Carlylese."[2] Even in his reviews Lowell overdid the use of anecdote, allusion, and metaphor. "So few writers err on the side of profusion," Higginson added, "that it seems ungracious to complain of this; but, after all, it is a defect of art."[3]

This defect of unevenness was frequently alluded to by Higginson. In 1876 Higginson found Lowell still "uneven in his finish, and not quite patient enough to master his own marvelous wealth."[4] In 1899 he pointed out that Lowell's "immense fertility of mind constantly led him into confused rhetoric and mixed metaphors... ."[5] Lowell's "poor but ingenious puns"[6] were also cited as defects. Lowell failed to be great, Higginson concluded, because he "never quite attained smoothness or finish of utterance."[7]

It is apparent that Higginson expected the Transcendental poets to seek the same neo-classical finish he had prescribed for Lowell. The poetry of Emerson, with its emphasis upon meaning rather than upon conventional verse form, presented a particularly trying problem to Higginson. He admired Emerson greatly, and detected brilliant bursts of inspiration in his

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[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Review of Lowell's Among My Books (Second Series)," Scribner's Monthly, XI (March, 1876), 747.

[5]Old Cambridge, p. 187.

[6]Contemporaries, p. 184.

[7]A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 163.

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poetry--but he never quite reconciled himself to the uneven expression which was so obvious to him in Emerson's lines:

> It must be left for future generations to determine Emerson's precise position even as a poet. There is seen in him the tantalizing combination of the profoundest thoughts with the greatest possible variation in artistic work,--sometimes mere boldness and almost waywardness, while at other times he achieves the most exquisite melody touched with a certain wild grace.[8]

He was pleased that Emerson revised some of his poems so that they were "less crude and whimsical."[9]

It is to Higginson's credit, however, that he did not regard form as an end in itself. Lack of form and too much concern about it were dangerous alternatives, he believed.[10] Conventional poetry, such as that written by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Bayard Taylor, or Edmund Clarence Stedman, evoked little response from him. From the few statements he made about such post-Civil War poetry, it is evident that he foresaw early oblivion for the work of these academicians. His opinion of Stedman's poetry illustrates this point. "It will probably be found that Stedman is one of the many men and women," he declared, "whose poetry appeals to a circle of friends during life, but mainly dies with them."[11] The poets

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[8] Contemporaries, p. 18.

[9] Ibid., p. 20.

[10] Short Studies of American Authors, p. 5.

[11] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Edmund Clarence Stedman," Independent, LXIV (1908), 231.

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who showed greater originality had a greater chance for lasting fame, Higginson believed, and he was attracted to the innovators even if he did not always approve of the liberties they took with poetic form.

Professor F.O. Matthiessen has noted that there are now two main ways of classifying the American poet: either as "inspired genius" (a descendant of Whitman), or as "craftsman" (a descendant of Poe).[12] Higginson, in his time, looked both for genius and for craftsmanship. Genius made the poet great--if he possessed the skill to express himself well.[13] Therefore, Higginson was particularly concerned with the formal characteristics of the new poetry; his discussions of Whitman, Lanier, and Dickinson all focus on this point. He was looking, however, for traditional form. That is the chief key to the confusion these poets wrought upon him. Ethical considerations influenced him too; he sometimes mistook the man for the poet. Such was the case in his attitude toward Whitman.

In no other instance was Higginson less judicial than he was in his appraisal of Whitman. Three factors caused him to look unsympathetically at Whitman and his innovations in poetry: it seemed to Higginson that Whitman shunned

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[12] F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (London, Toronto, New York [1941]), pp. 578-579.

[13] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, p. 262.

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responsibilities which individuals in a democracy must assume; a meeting with Whitman gave Higginson a bad impression of him; and the praise that English critics gave Whitman before he was recognized widely in America caused Higginson to react unfavorably. These factors will be discussed before Higginson's opinion of Whitman's poetry is considered, for they interfered with his attainment of an objective view. But in spite of this aversion to Whitman, he never disparaged him as a poet so thoroughly as did such critics as Barrett Wendell and Thomas Bailey Aldrich.[14] In fact, many of his judgments are sound--his recognition of Whitman's artistic development will be seen as a case in point.

Higginson rejected Whitman almost completely as a national poet. He did list Leaves of Grass among the ten books he considered "most characteristic of American genius and life--literature which could not have been written on any but American soil,"[15] saying of its author:

> Whitman's 'barbaric yawp,' however high or low we may class it, is absolutely cis-Atlantic. He is as essentially steeped in his national life as Poe is detached from

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[14] In his Literary History of America (p. 476), Wendell called Whitman's style "excrescent, abortive." Aldrich said of Whitman: "That he will outlast the majority of his contemporaries I haven't the faintest doubt--but it will be in a glass case or a quart of spirits in an anatomical museum" (Ferris Greenslet, The Life of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, pp. 138-139).

[15] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "American Genius and Life," Outlook, LXXI (1902), 776.

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it.[16]

In Part of a Man's Life (1905), he listed Whitman among our outstanding writers, pointing out that optimism was a characteristic which they had in common.[17] That is the extent of the favorable recognition that Higginson gave Whitman's nationalism. Professor Portia Baker has noticed this rejection and has observed that although Higginson pleaded for more vitality in our literature, he ignored Whitman's vigor:

> In January, 1870, Thomas Wentworth Higginson in an article on Americanism in literature...did not mention Whitman, though the gist of his complaint of the native literature was its mildness, a fault which Whitman would seem to have overcome.[18]

She offers no explanation for Higginson's decision to disregard so completely Whitman's robust account of American life.

The key to this failure to recognize Whitman as typically national is the strong ethical emphasis which Higginson incorporated into his definition of Americanism. The American, Higginson said, is an "advancing figure," who after establishing national self-government will move on toward the highest in intellectual and artistic accomplishments.[19] Individual growth is a pre-requisite for this

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[16] Ibid., p. 777.

[17] Part of a Man's Life, p. 25.

[18] Portia Baker, "Walt Whitman and The Atlantic Monthly," American Literature, VI (1934), 293.

[19] Atlantic Essays, pp. 52-53.

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national growth. "Let a man choose his pursuit, and make all else count for recreation only,"[20] declared Higginson. He agreed with Lanier, who said:

> 'A republic is the government of the spirit; a republic depends upon the self-control of each member; you cannot make a republic out of muscles and prairies and rocky mountains; republics are made of the spirit.'[21]

In Whitman, the man, Higginson could not find such self-control as Lanier had emphasized. He saw Walt as a representative of the "merely brawny and sinewy"[22] type of democracy. Higginson believed that the individual should assume responsibilities and reveal in his every act a consciousness of ethical values. Like Thoreau, he believed in what Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has described as "sternest private obedience."[23] He could discern no such discipline in Whitman. To illustrate his point he contrasted Whitman with the kind of idealist he himself preferred, a young admirer of Emerson who

> had painted on his door in large golden letters the motto of Fourier, 'Universal Unity,' with beams of starlight diverging from it in all directions. Below this was the motto, hung separately and painted in neat black and white, 'Please wipe your feet.' Unfortunately, Whit-

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[20] Ibid., p. 56.

[21] As quoted by Higginson in Contemporaries, p. 98.

[22] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 222.

[23] "Jacksonian Democracy and Literature," in The Transcendentalist Revolt Against Materialism, ed. George F. Whicher (Boston [1949]), p. 15.

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> man himself, with all his genius, was not quite careful enough to provide the foot-mat.[24]

Such is the basis for Higginson's aversion to Whitman as a man, an aversion which acquired personal overtones during the emotion-charged days of the Civil War. There was an impulsiveness in Higginson which occasionally carried him away from the judicial course he preferred (his quickly acquired dislike of Matthew Arnold is another case in point).[25] This impulsiveness, prompted by his zeal to see the war won speedily by a united effort, caused him to attack Whitman with considerable rancor. Whitman, he felt, showed by his wartime behavior that he was not a man of principle.

Higginson met Walt Whitman just once, and then just prior to the Civil War in 1860. Whitman's robust appearance must have belied his forty-one years. Higginson took particular notice of Walt's physique. Although he seemed to need conditioning to get in good physical shape, Whitman was, nevertheless, "a handsome, burly man, heavily built... ."[26] It irked the Colonel later that this able-bodied citizen, who seemed to glory in his physique, chose to serve in the army hospitals. True, Higginson said, he had not seen Whitman as "manly," but he did believe his "Boweriness"

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[24] A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 234.

[25] Arnold had held that the Puritan spirit in America was hostile to literature and art (Atlantic Essays, p. 59), but he had offended Higginson even more by challenging the Colonel's view that there was a distinctive American temperament (Carlyle's Laugh, p. 374).

[26] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 230.

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could be converted into usefulness in the army:

> ...the personal impression made on me by the poet was not so much of manliness as of Boweriness, if I may coin the phrase; indeed rather suggesting Sidney Lanier's subsequent vigorous phrase, 'a dandy roustabout.' This passing impression did not hinder me from thinking of Whitman with hope and satisfaction at a later day when regiments were to be raised for the war, when the Bowery seemed the very place to enlist them... . When, however, after waiting a year or more, Whitman decided that the post for him was hospital service, I confess to feeling a reaction, which was rather increased than diminished by his profuse celebration of his own labors in that direction.[27]

Here is the perennial charge--the one made so often during every war--that of shirking. In addition there are the imputations of physical coarseness and inappropriate self-praise. The Colonel, who had risked death as the commander of a negro regiment--certain death if captured--had little sympathy for Walt Whitman. His feelings were stirred, rather, by the conduct of Lanier, "who, with pulmonary disease upon him, could still keep in his saddle as a soldier."[28] He fell victim to his own emotions, forgot the critical approach he believed most judicious, that of one artist helping another.[29] He let his view of Whitman the man stand between him and the poetry. This is biographical

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[27] Ibid., pp. 230-231. Higginson admits (p. 230) that the fact he read Leaves of Grass while he was seasick may have helped prejudice him against Whitman!

[28] Contemporaries, p. 96.

[29] Ibid., p. 95.

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criticism at its worst.

Higginson saw Whitman's English fame as no positive proof of greatness. The English had praised Artemus Ward, Josh Billings and the Canadian T.C. Haliburton with almost equal emphasis.[30] Besides, the first English edition of Whitman's works had been "expurgated and fumigated."[31] To the English, Whitman's "rather trite and almost conventional" feeling about democracy would be "picturesque and novel," whereas "we grow less and less inclined to hear this oft-told tale in plain prose,.../and/ are least of all tempted to read in what is not even plain verse."[32] No, said Higginson, we cannot accept Whitman's English reputation as proof of his stature as an American writer. Instead we must look at him ourselves "as dispassionately as if he were an author all our own"![33]

In his analysis of Whitman's poetry, Higginson sought to establish such an objective view. He was most objective when discussing the form, or the techniques Whitman used to organize and express his ideas and feelings. Discussion of the ideas and feelings, however, inevitably led Higginson into consideration of their ethical implications, and thus in regard to the content of the poems his views frequently

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[30] Ibid., p. 74.
[31] Ibid., p. 75.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., pp. 75-76.

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echoed his opinion of Whitman, the man.

Lack of form, Higginson believed, constituted Whitman's greatest weakness as a poet. Whitman seemed to be incapable of achieving artistic expression; he did not reveal the ability to work out appropriate form for his ideas. He had discarded the traditional methods, but he had nothing with which to replace them. The "mere revolt against the tyranny of form" which Higginson saw Whitman making has never been sufficent to bring lasting fame to a poet.[34] Inspiration itself will not suffice, despite its major importance. There must also be harmonious expression of the poet's novel insight. The poet must learn how to put the "best thoughts into the best words."[35] As for Whitman, "he has phrase, but not form," wrote Higginson, "--and without form there is no immortality."[36] He lacked what Higginson called "the shaping imagination."[37]

This lack of power to shape materials into pleasing form was particularly obvious in Whitman's early poetry, Higginson pointed out. The early poetry lacked "compression;" it was simply enumerative."[38] Whitman recklessly sought effects by "throwing a dozen epithets to see if one might stick,"[39]

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[34] Ibid., p. 77.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., p. 84.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., p. 77.
[39] Ibid., p. 78.

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and by resorting to endless repetitions.[40] He tended "to substitute mere cadence for form."[41]

"These follies diminish in his later works,"[42] said Higginson, recognizing a tendency on Whitman's part to use shorter lines and to improve the rhythm.[43] As might be guessed, the Colonel liked O Captain, My Captain best of all Whitman's poems, chiefly because it "came nearest to the regularity of rhythm."[44] He also liked the content of this more orderly poetry, quoting the following lines with great feeling:

> Joy, Shipmate, joy!
> (Pleas'd to my soul at death I cry)
> Our life is closed, our life begins,
> The long, long anchorage we leave,
> The ship is clear at last, she leaps,
> She swiftly courses from the shore,
> Joy, Shipmate, joy![45]

This poem, he concluded, afforded Whitman his best chance for immortality as a poet.[46]

In the content of Whitman's work a similar growth was discernible to Higginson, a gradual growth away from extravagance toward a more intellectual attitude toward life. Whitman's ethical inadequacy revealed itself particularly

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[40]It is evident that Higginson saw no connection between the parallel constructions and the form of Whitman's poetry.

[41]Contemporaries, p. 76.

[42]Ibid., p. 78.

[43]Ibid., p. 79.

[44]The New World and the New Book, p. 101.

[45]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life, p. 3

[46]A Reader's History of American Literature, p. 264.

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in his early work, Higginson maintained. There the ideal and the real were out of balance; grossness was predominant. Whitman was intoxicated with himself, and with his country; these themes gave him power, but they also had their danger, "on the personal side leading to pruriency and on the national to rant."[47] His "vague sentiment of democracy...is the rhythmic or semi-rhythmic reproduction of a thousand Fourth of July orations."[48] On the "personal side," he emphasized the sensual side of his nature without reference, so far as Higginson could see, to the "ideal side of passion."[49] Love to Whitman, Higginson decided, was only the "blunt, undisguised attraction of sex to sex."[50] Thus Higginson was pretty much a man of his time in missing Whitman's symbolism. He did, however, recognize that Whitman put less emphasis on the sensual as he grew older, and suggested that if Whitman had been let alone (a reference, no doubt, to the genteel reaction against him) he might have removed some of the more provocative references to sex from his work.[51] With regard to Whitman's growth as a poet, Higginson said:

> ...his career purified itself, as many careers do, in the alembic of years, and up to the time of his death (March 26, 1892) he gained constantly both in friends and in readers. Intellectually

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[47] Contemporaries, p. 79.
[48] Ibid., p. 75.
[49] Ibid., p. 80.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

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> speaking, all critics now admit that he shows in an eminent degree that form of the ideal faculty which Emerson conceded to Margaret Fuller--he has 'lyric glimpses.' Rarely constructing anything, he is yet singularly gifted in phrases, in single cadences, in casual wayward strains as from an AEolian harp.[52]

Higginson also pointed out the criticism that has been frequently made of Whitman, that he failed to write poetry representative of the average man:[53]

> Of all our poets, he is really the least simple, the most meretricious; and this is the reason why the honest consciousness of the classes which he most celebrates,--the drover, the teamster, the soldier,--has never been reached by his songs.[54]

It can be concluded, then, that Higginson rejected Whitman as man and poet for ethical and aesthetic reasons. He looked askance at the apparent formlessness of Whitman's life. The "great moral principles"[55] Higginson valued so much called for an earnestness which he failed to detect in Whitman. He preferred someone like Thoreau who was always "high-minded."[56] In contrast, Whitman's concern with human welfare was "broad, vague, indolent."[57]

Whitman, to Higginson so eccentric and indolent in his

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[52] Ibid., p. 81.

[53] Stedman, among others, made this point (see Poets of America, p. 394), as did Aldrich (see Ferris Greenslet, The Life of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, p. 138).

[54] Contemporaries, p. 83.

[55] Atlantic Essays, p. 46.

[56] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 66.

[57] Contemporaries, p. 84.

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conduct, was likewise disdainful of the laws of art. He showed evidence of genuine inspiration, but he did not follow Higginson's dictum that inspiration should be combined with taste. He was not so much opposed to Whitman's break with traditional forms, as he was to his failure to achieve skillful, disciplined expression.

Whitman did not please Higginson as a national writer because their conceptions of America and the American citizen differed. Higginson saw every man in America as potentially an exceptional man, providing he developed himself in accordance with his opportunities. Whitman was content in his poetry to depict and represent the "simple, separate person or the enmasse,"[58] taking that person as he was--no matter how imperfect. Likewise, whereas Higginson stood among those who were busy "sublimating or intellectualizing the crude energy of American physical life,"[59] Whitman shunned "the intellectual and the refined,"[60] and enjoyed the robust life of the growing nation.

The Puritanical zeal in Higginson, and his neo-classic attitude toward poetic form kept him from achieving a fair appraisal of Whitman. The narrowness of his view is summed up in the observation he made in 1867:

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[58]Henry S. Canby, "Walt Whitman," Literary History of the United States, p. 478.

[59]Ibid., p. 483.

[60]Ibid.

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> It is no discredit to Walt Whitman that he wrote 'Leaves of Grass,' only that he did not burn it afterwards and reserve himself for something better.[61]

And although he did recognize some growth in Whitman, he never varied much from that early position. The moral zeal of the New England "come-outer" and his Brahmin beliefs about style interfered with the very judiciousness he sought.

Higginson's evaluations of Sidney Lanier and Emily Dickinson reveal that when he was sufficiently impressed by genius he did not hold strictly to traditional ideas about form. These two poets seem to have had a major role in making him aware that established techniques could be disregarded to a great extent by inspired poets who could achieve their own appropriate expression. His judgment of Lanier reveals liberality about technique unusual in the 1880's. The breadth of his judgment becomes apparent in contrast with the views of such prominent literary men of the time as Edmund Clarence Stedman and Thomas Bailey Aldrich.

Neither Stedman nor Aldrich could accept Lanier's experimentations with poetic form. They considered Lanier a minor poet--and quite an unimportant one. Stedman wrote of him:

> Let critics deduce what laws they may; it is not

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[61] Atlantic Essays, p. 44.

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> for the poet deliberately to set about illustrating them. ...Lanier's movement was directly in the line of his own endowment; he has left hints for successors who may avoid his chief mistake--that of wandering along in improvisations like some facile, dreamy master of the keyboard. That remarkable piece of analysis, The Science of English Verse, serves little purpose except like Coleridge's metaphysics, to give us further respect for its author's intellectual powers.[62]

Aldrich was certain about Lanier's inferiority. "I don't believe," he wrote to Stedman in 1900, "that there are twenty-five persons in the United States who would place Lanier anywhere but in the rear rank of minor poets... ."[63]

Thirteen years before Aldrich made that statement, Higginson had expressed the opposite view. In 1887 he published in the Chautauquan the appraisal of Lanier that was later reprinted in Contemporaries. More important than the early Northern recognition that this article accorded Lanier was its announcement that he was a great poet.[64]

Higginson noted approvingly that Lanier possessed a fine artistic sense. Music and poetry were inborn in him;[65] and whereas Stedman held that Lanier violated Lessing's law that each art should be distinctive,[66] Higginson approved of Lanier as representing the "middle ground...halfway between

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[62] Poets of America, pp. 450-451.

[63] Ferris Greenslet, The Life of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, p. 214.

[64] Contemporaries, p. 85.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Poets of America, p. 449.

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verse and music."[67] With reference to this "middle ground" position, Higginson could see how the Science of English Verse would be significant, but he demurred from analyzing it, suggesting that his knowledge of music was not equal to the task. Without the insight that knowledge afforded, and which he realized was necessary for a fair evaluation, the book seemed "ingenious, suggestive, and overstrained."[68] Yet Lanier was no mere theorist, Higginson held, but a poet who relied upon a highly developed taste, "an educated love of beauty."[69]

Had Lanier relied upon theory or law exclusively, his poetry would have suffered. He was "too true a poet to do this," declared Higginson, quoting approvingly from a chapter in the Science of English Verse entitled "On the Educated Love of Beauty as the Artist's Only Law":

> 'For the artist in verse there is no law; the perception and love of beauty constitute the whole outfit... . In all cases the appeal is, the ear; but the ear should for that purpose be educated up to the highest possible plane of culture.'[70]

In the poetry itself "this perpetual appeal to the ear" was evident to Higginson as was the fact that in the application of his theory Lanier was "implicit rather than explicit."[71]

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[67] Contemporaries, p. 93.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p. 94.
[70] Ibid., pp. 94-95.
[71] Ibid., p. 95.

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He summed up his satisfaction with Lanier's poetry by pointing out that it showed Lanier working out his ideas "in the free faith which he held."[72] There is fine praise in Higginson's analysis:

> There is uniformly a wonderful beat and cadence to them--a line of a dozen syllables mating with a line of a single syllable in as satisfactory a movement as can be found in his favorite Mother Goose or in the 'patting Juba' of a plantation singer. ...Having spent so much of his life in playing the flute in an orchestra, he has also an ear for the distribution of instruments, and this gives him a desire for the antiphonal, for introducing an answer or echo or compensating note.[73]

He liked the "daring, impetuous" quality of the poetry.[74]

To Higginson Lanier was great as an artist because his work was "so continuous and systematic, subject to such self-imposed laws... ."[75] He also found Lanier meeting his ethical standards; he found in him the high seriousness of purpose that he missed in Whitman, and, as has already been mentioned, he agreed with Lanier that every individual in a republic should show self-discipline.[76] Higginson preferred Lanier's "refined chivalry"[77] to the "fleshliness" of Leaves of Grass. His ethical judgment echoed the genteel tradition as he called Lanier "the Sir Galahad of our American poets."[78]

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[72] Ibid., p. 99.
[73] Ibid., pp. 99-100.
[74] Ibid., p. 91.
[75] Ibid., p. 85.
[76] Ibid., p. 98.
[77] Ibid., p. 96.
[78] Ibid., p. 101.

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He also noticed Lanier's use of a "wealth of outdoor observation as makes even Thoreau thin and arid."[79] But the most significant thing about his treatment of Lanier was his acceptance of Lanier's "self-imposed laws" of poetry. No narrow traditionalist would have done that. And until Higginson had "discovered" Lanier, there is no sign in the Colonel's remarks about poetry that he believed genius could fashion its own poetic form so completely.

Higginson was not thoroughly convinced by Lanier's example, however, that experiment with form was a good thing. The allegiance he held to traditional form in poetry influenced him considerably as he sought to decide the merit of Emily Dickinson's poetry. The necessity of deciding between the value of unconventional appropriateness and less suitable conventionality caused him noticeable concern.

The Atlantic Monthly for October, 1891, contains Higginson's account of his unusual friendship with Emily Dickinson. This essay was reprinted in Carlyle's Laugh and Other Surprises (1909). His contribution to the editing of the first two series of the poems is discussed in detail by Millicent Todd Bingham in Ancestor's Brocades, The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson (1945). His reaction to the poet and her work is further described in his preface to the first volume

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[79] Ibid., p. 100.

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of the poems (1890), in a brief notice in A Reader's History of American Literature (1903), and in a few miscellaneous comments, particularly in his letters and journals. Unfortunately, the letters he wrote Emily have been destroyed--with the exception of one dated May, 1868, which has been quoted by Margaret Dickinson Bianchi in The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson (1924). These sources reveal Higginson pleased by Emily's originality but disturbed by her "defiance of form."[80]

In 1862 Higginson had his first opportunity to judge the poetry of Emily Dickinson. In April of that year she sent him four poems, asking: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?"[81] It so happened that there was a lull just then in his martial activities,[82] and he seems to have found time to comply promptly with her request. The poems were the ones beginning: "Safe in their alabaster chambers"; "I'll tell you how the sun rose"; "We play at paste"; and "The nearest dream recedes, unrealized." When he had read them, he knew that this was no ordinary poet who had written to him:

> The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now,

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[80] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 256.
[81] Ibid., p. 249.
[82] Cheerful Yesterdays, p. 248.

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> after half a century of further knowledge; and with it came the problem never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism.[83]

In the 1891 essay, he told of his response to the poem, "We play at paste." Professor Anna Mary Wells has analyzed his comment, contrasting it with the more conventional criticism of the time:

> According to the popular view of nineteenth century literary criticism, Colonel Higginson should have said: 'Pearl does not rhyme with fool; 'ourself' is a grammatically incorrect form; the first stanza is iambic and the second won't scan.' In stead he said: 'This comprises in its eight lines a truth so searching that it seems the condensed experience of a long life.'[84]

Higginson made similar comments on these and other poems Emily sent him in her letters. The poem beginning "A bird came down the walk" "showed, what had already been visible, a rare and delicate sympathy with the life of nature."[85] The one beginning, "Of tribulation, these are they" was a "strong poem" with a "breathless conclusion."[86] There was a "singular felicity of phrase and an aerial lift" in the poem, "The nearest dream recedes, unrealized."[87] When Emily wrote of the humming bird, Higginson marvelled at the poem's visual imagery, and declared:

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[83] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 252.

[84] Anna Mary Wells, "Early Criticism of Emily Dickinson," American Literature, I (1929), 248.

[85] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 256.

[86] Ibid., p. 261.

[87] Ibid., p. 251.

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> Nothing in literature, I am sure, so condenses into a few words that gorgeous atom of life and fire of which she here attempts the description.[88]

Thus Emily's ideas were appealing to Higginson, and her expression of them often attractive to him. More frequently, however, he showed concern about "that defiance of form, never through carelessness, and never precisely from whim, which so marked her."[89] With good discernment, he realized that she was interested in the thought she wished to express and that she never altered it for the sake of form.[90] "She almost always grasped whatever she sought," he wrote, "but with some fracture of grammar and dictionary on the way."[91] Sometimes, however, she did not succeed in expressing her meaning clearly. Higginson often found her "obscure," and, less frequently, "inscrutable"; as he pointed out this fault of obscurity, he added: "...though obscurity is sometimes... a compliment to the reader, yet it is never safe to press this compliment too hard."[92]

These problems of form presented difficulties to Higginson and Mrs. Todd when they began selecting enough poems to fill a volume. The condition of the manuscripts has been

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[88] Ibid., p. 268.
[89] Ibid., p. 256.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., p. 268.
[92] Ibid.

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described in detail by Mrs. Todd,[93] and to Higginson this vast, irregular assortment of poems--written in three styles of handwriting, all difficult, and in confusing stages of revision--seemed at first to be a "tangle of literary wheat and chaff" from which scarcely enough poetry might be drawn to make "an even semi-conventional volume."[94]

He changed his mind after Mrs. Todd copied several hundred of the poems and sent them to him for comment. At his suggestion she had classified the poems into three groups, A, B, and C. The entry in her diary reads, in part:

> He suggested putting all the best ones, and my own favorites, into a class marked A--not only those of most original thought, but expressed in the best form. The next choice, B, those with striking ideas, but with too many of her peculiarities of construction to be used unaltered for the public, and C, those I considered too obscure or too irregular in form for public use, however brilliant and suggestive.[95]

With these poems before him, Higginson found a sudden growth of interest: "I can't tell you how much I am enjoying the poems," he wrote Mrs. Todd on November 25, 1889. "There are many new to me which take my breath away & which also have form beyond most of those I have seen before."[96]

As an editor of the poems, Higginson's own interest in poetic form was reinforced by his knowledge that the readers

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[93] Ancestor's Brocades, pp. 17-18.
[94] Ibid., p. 18.
[95] Ibid., p. 34.
[96] Ibid.

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of the time would expect the poetry to be conventional, particularly in rhyme, spelling, and grammar. When he spoke of form in regard to Emily's poetry he invariably meant the traditional or conventional kind, not organic unity. Mrs. Todd shared his views on this matter. Anxious for an audience for the poems, they considered the contemporary traditional forms with noticeable deference. Mrs. Bingham has indicated the contemporary preferences which the two editors kept in mind, preferences which seemed to coincide with Mrs. Todd's views more than they did with Higginson's. "In the nineties," writes Mrs. Bingham, "rhyme, particularly in a lyric, was the first necessity... ."[97] The editors, therefore, occasionally made some changes--even of entire lines--to obtain rhymes. They also changed punctuation, or added it, for Emily had relied heavily upon dashes and made "spendthrift use of capital letters."[98] Their general policy, and the influence of the taste of the nineties upon it, is summarized by Mrs. Bingham:

> Though both editors considered it necessary at times to smooth the poems off, they preferred to make as few changes as possible--to leave a poem as Emily wrote it. But they knew that if she was to be read at all, she must be presented in a form not too disturbing to the reader of the nineties, who might be discouraged if a poem did not fit an accustomed mold. Eccentricities of grammar and spelling, too, might so prejudice a

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[97] Ibid., p. 38.

[98] Ibid., pp. 39-40.

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> critic that he would dismiss the poems after one glance. So a good many changes were made.[99]

When Higginson dared to disregard such strict concern with conventionality--as in his defense of Emily's use of *lain* as the past participle of *lay*--he not only caused Mrs. Todd some perturbation, but "even outsiders protested"![100]

The outstanding case of such protest was that voiced by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, whom Professor Stanley T. Williams has aptly described as "the singer of red and white roses."[101] Higginson, in his preface to the first volume of the poems, had revealed that his admiration for Emily's imaginative power was stronger than his concern over her indifference to conventional rules. He felt that she possessed "a rigorous standard of her own," and "an ear which had its own tenacious fastidiousness,"[102] a statement reminiscent of his opinion of Lanier. In Higginson's summation of his views was a reference to the superiority of insight over grammar that offended Aldrich:

> But the main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. After all, when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence. As

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[99] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[100] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

[101] "Experiments in Poetry: Sidney Lanier and Emily Dickinson," *Literary History of the United States*, p. 900.

[102] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Preface," *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (Boston, 1890), p. iv.

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> Ruskin wrote in his earlier and better days, 'No weight nor mass nor beauty of execution can outweigh one grain or fragment of thought.'[103]

Aldrich had quite a different opinion of Emily:

> The English critic who said of Miss Emily Dickinson that she might have become a fifth-rate poet 'if she had only mastered the rudiments of grammar and gone into metrical training for about fifteen years,'--the rather candid English critic who said this somewhat overstated his case. He had, however, a fairly good case. If Miss Dickinson had undergone the austere curriculum indicated, she would, I am sure, have become an admirable lyric poet of the second magnitude. ...the incoherence and formlessness of her--I don't know how to designate them--versicles are fatal...an eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village (or anywhere else) cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar. In his charming preface...Mr. Higginson insidiously remarks: 'After all, when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence.' But an ungrammatical thought does not, as a general thing, take one's breath away, except in a sense the reverse of flattering.[104]

To this attack, Higginson made no reply.

Less vehement was the poet Arlo Bates, who also represented the "practitioners of poetic art."[105] He saw Emily's poems "marked by an extraordinary crudity of workmanship." Her difficulty was that she had not mastered the technique of poetic expression:

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[103] Ibid., p. vi.

[104] "In Re Emily Dickinson," Atlantic Monthly, LXIX (Jan., 1892), 143-144.

[105] The phrase is that of F.L. Pattee. See A History of American Literature Since 1870, p. 117.

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> Had she published, and been forced by ambition and perhaps by need into learning the technical part of her art, she would have stood at the head of American singers.[106]

Even though Bates was looking at the "edited" manuscript that had been sent to the printer, he saw in it "not the slightest pretence of anything it is fair to call punctuation"![107] He decided, too, that one half of the poems scheduled to be printed should be omitted from the manuscript,[108] ruling against such poems as "I died for beauty," "Safe in their alabaster chambers,"[109] and "How many times these low feet staggered."

Before he seems to have considered the implications of Bates' views, Higginson sent a brief note to Mrs. Todd agreeing with the criticisms.[110] But when he had had opportunity to reconsider, and go over the manuscript himself, Higginson realized how wrong Bates had been. He wrote Mrs. Todd:

> I have gone through the poems numbering & rubbing out pencil marks. My opinion of Mr. Bates has gone down greatly, for he certainly wished to leave out several of the best.[111]

When the book came from the press, Higginson knew that his not-too-vigorous defense of Emily's genius had been more than justified. "Books just arrived--bound," he wrote. "I am astounded in looking through. How could we ever have

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[106] Ancestor's Brocades, p. 52.
[107] Ibid., p. 53.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid., p. 54.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.

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doubted about them."[112] By the time a second edition was in press his enthusiasm was greater than it had ever been. He wrote to Mrs. Todd on December 15, 1890, trying to tell her how he felt about the "rare genius" they had revealed:

> I feel as if we had climbed to a cloud, pulled it away, and revealed a new star behind it. I have just been going over the reviews & noting... who quotes each poem. Have you observed how they are distributed? Sooner or later each poem, it would seem, must find its one admirer. A few poems show a consensus of appreciation... . Yet some of the finest are not yet picked out by anybody.
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> . . . . . .
>
> Such things as I find in her letters! 'The Madonnas I see are those that pass the House to their work, carrying Saviors with them.' Is not that one of the take-your-breath-away thoughts?
>
> There is much that I never could print as where she writes, 'Of our greatest acts we are ignorant. You are not aware that you saved my life.' What an unique existence was hers.[113]

Yet he never became so enthusiastic that he forgot the imperfect craftsmanship. When he advised Mrs. Todd about the preface for the second volume of the poems, he said:

> It might be well for you to suggest in your preface that we never can tell to what rigorous revision these poems might have been subjected, had the author printed them herself. They are to be regarded in many cases as the mere unfinished sketches or first studies of an artist, preserved for their intrinsic value, but not presented as being in final form.[114]

Such, in brief, is the outline of Higginson's contact

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[112] Ibid., p. 72.
[113] Ibid., pp. 81-82.
[114] Ibid., p. 143.

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with Emily Dickinson and her poetry. That he did not do his utmost to know her and understand her is evident from many of his remarks. For example, in 1873 he belied any great appreciation of her genius by calling her his "eccentric poetess,"[115] and when he wrote of her in 1891 he could not recall just when he had paid her his second visit.[116] It is evident too that he must have considered other projects more important than his early work as editor of the poems.[117]

Yet, when as her editor he had to decide what to say about this woman whose emotional qualities were so hard for him to comprehend, he came forth with an evaluation that was excellent for its time.[118] He praised her imagination; he liked the original way she interpreted life, and drew upon her own experience, limited though it was. He regretted that she often lacked finish in her craftsmanship--and, although he saw that she stressed thought more than rhythm or rhyme, he wished she could have brought form and content into better balance. He saw the risk she ran in breaking with convention, but he also recognized that the break with tradition could bring her poetry strength.[119] There is sufficient liberality

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[115] Letters and Journals, p. 268.

[116] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 277.

[117] Ancestor's Brocades, p. 18.

[118] See Anna Mary Wells, "Early Criticism of Emily Dickinson," American Literature, I (1929), 243-259.

[119] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Preface," Poems by Emily Dickinson, p. iii.

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apparent in his judgments to distinguish him from the idealists who simply re-worked old themes and old forms and made aesthetic values their chief concern.

Through these three evaluations runs a common theme: the insistence that the poet be a skilled craftsman. Higginson asked--not as a psychologist or as a philosopher, but as a believer in decorum and the neo-classic standards--that there be artistic finish in American poetry. Now other conservative critics, with much more profound critical theories, are asking much the same thing.

It is well known that in the last quarter of a century aesthetic values have received more and more attention from literary critics. T.S. Eliot is usually recognized as having exerted the greatest influence in establishing this interest in the "elucidation of the work of art and the correction of taste."[120] "He has typified," says Professor F.O. Matthiessen, "the fundamental shift in our way of regarding the artist: from inspired seer to trained craftsman."[121] There are ethical implications, of course, in such an interest in craftsmanship; the poet is responsible, Eliot believes, for accomplishing the best

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[120] Clarence D. Thorpe, and Norman E. Nelson, "Criticism in the Twentieth Century, A Bird's-Eye View," College English, VIII (1947), 402-403.

[121] American Renaissance, p. xviii.

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possible results with the subject matter at hand.[122] Whitman fails to meet this responsibility; to Eliot he is "an occasional master of prose,"[123] not a great poet.

During the 1930's, other critics, also interested in aesthetic values, have presented more detailed analyses of American writing than Eliot has done. Professor Yvor Winters, in particular, has made specific studies.

Of Emily Dickinson's craftsmanship Professor Winters has written: "...probably no poet of comparable reputation has been guilty of so much unpardonable writing."[124] This "unpardonable writing" reveals serious defects in meter and diction:

> Her meter, at its worst--that is, most of the time--is a kind of stiff sing-song; her diction, at its worst, is a kind of poetic nursery jargon.[125]

Professor Winters, like Higginson, finds in her work an "unpredictable boldness in plunging into obscurity."[126] He feels that no other great poet has shown greater lack of taste,[127] yet she also had her moments of fine achievement:

> ...there are unnumerable beautiful lines and passages wasted in the desert of her crudities;

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[122] T.S. Eliot, " 'Ulysses', Order, and Myth," in Criticism, The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment, ed. by Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, and Gordon McKenzie (N.Y./1948/), p. 270.

[123] American Renaissance, p. 579.

[124] Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason (New York, 1947), p. 283.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid., p. 287.

[127] Ibid., p. 298.

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> her defects, more than those of any other great poet that I have read, are constantly at the brink, or pushing beyond the brink, of her best poems.[128]

He reacts much as Higginson did to Emily's genius. He too is puzzled that a poet so blessed with inspiration should fail so noticeably in achieving suitable expression:

> Her best poems...can never be isolated certainly and defensibly from her defects; yet she is a poetic genius of the highest order, and this ambiguity in one's feeling about her is profoundly disturbing.[129]

She had also managed to impress Higginson with her genius,[130] leaving him quite bewildered and wishing that she possessed more of the "objective or external quality" to go with her "rare qualities."[131]

Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are natural targets for the critic stressing craftsmanship. Professor Winters can point to Whitman's "lax and diffuse"[132] use of repetition and find many reasons for concluding that he was a "second-rate" poet.[133] And Emily Dickinson, as Higginson noted, paid more attention to thought than to its rhythmic expression. Lanier, emphasizing craftsmanship as he did, left himself less vulnerable, and he is seldom called to account by the aesthetically minded critics. Robert Penn Warren is among the few new

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[128] Ibid., p. 299.
[129] Ibid., p. 284.
[130] Carlyle's Laugh, p. 252.
[131] Ibid., p. 282.
[132] In Defense of Reason, p. 31.
[133] Ibid., p. 91.

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critics who have sought to evaluate Lanier. He does not like Lanier's work, but it is not so much aesthetic deficiencies that he finds provocative as it is the intellectual implications of Lanier's position.[134] Higginson did not take that approach. His demands upon the American poets centered not so much upon the implications of their thought as upon their responsibilities and achievements as craftsmen. Even with the neo-classic standards with which he evaluated their techniques, he discerned symptoms of a weakness which now attracts critics who have much wider knowledge and perception, and who look for a subtlety and finish beyond anything he ever apprehended.

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[134] See Robert Penn Warren, "The Blind Poet: Sidney Lanier," American Review, II (1933-1934), 27-45.

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CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

As a critic, Thomas Wentworth Higginson showed unusual discernment despite his lack of profundity. His value rests in his devotion to judicious aesthetic and ethical standards, and in his conviction that American literature possessed its own significant history and characteristics. He deserves more favorable recognition than has been shown him since his death in 1911.

Although many of his insights are still timely, they resulted from the application of standards which have been supplanted by more intellectual systems of criticism. Higginson was not a neo-humanist nor can he be compared to the New Critics. He was very much the product of his time. His standards represent a compromise between the old and the new ideas which existed side by side during his formative years. He drew his ethical standards chiefly from the new humanitarian and individualistic emphasis of the Unitarians and the Transcendentalists, but he also retained some of the moral earnestness of his Puritan ancestors. For his aesthetic standards he was indebted principally to the persisting neo-classical ideas about form. Eclecticism characterized his philosophy; he was not a speculative thinker, and his critical views represent not so much a system as an attitude.

The ethical values he sought were those fundamental to democracy; he believed in the worth of all men and in their

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right to grow spiritually. Inherent in his humanitarianism were important ideas about the nature and purpose of American literature. Since Higginson believed that in America the ideal of individual development was finding its finest realization, he championed an American literature which he felt would reflect that ideal. He became an ardent literary nationalist and held that American literature should free itself from its colonial complex. Although he was sympathetic to the prospect of a world literature, he believed that national literatures would have to be perfected before they could make worthwhile contributions to such a literature.

Later critics--Van Wyck Brooks in particular--have written in great detail of the literary life in America. Higginson's work as a portrayer of literary men and events anticipated such an interest in our literature. His work as a literary historian is so attractive that later historians have not achieved a more appealing account. With clarity and a wealth of anecdote, Higginson wrote as a first hand observer about his contemporaries who were making an American literature. His appreciations were based on experience and careful regard for the facts. They present later students of American literature with much valuable insight into literary conditions from approximately 1840 on.

Through his belief that American literature should reveal the democratic spirit, Higginson became interested in indigenous material and championed the cause of realism.

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He became an enthusiastic advocate of local color writing, viewing it as a forerunner of realistic writing which would express, artistically, the national theme of individual worth. His acceptance of the new trend in fiction testifies to the liberalism with which he accepted change. Yet, with the beginnings of naturalism he was soon sharply aware that his belief in the spiritual significance of life was being challenged. Naturalism represented a deterministic view of life which he could not accept. He virtually ignored the work of the naturalists, considering it unrepresentative of American life. Critics now are expressing a similar reaction to the negative philosophy so characteristic of realistic writing in the last fifty years.

The naturalists and their advocates, however, were not content to ignore Higginson and other idealists. These extreme realists did not see any reason to be optimistic about life. Their attack on the idealists did a great deal to obscure Higginson's reputation. His optimism, his disregard of experience not connected with his view of life, and his strict obedience to principle (outward behavior frequently indistinguishable from that resulting from obedience to conventional morality) are aspects of his idealism which made him vulnerable to such an attack.

Ethical premises thus played a major part in his thinking about literary nationalism, and the post-Civil War interest in

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realism. Aesthetic considerations also figured prominently in his critical views. Higginson sought to balance his strong interest in originality with an emphasis on form. This belief in the value of form is constant in his work, but receives particular stress in his comment on the later poetry. In judging the poetry of Walt Whitman, Sidney Lanier, and Emily Dickinson, he revealed most clearly the inadequacy of his critical principles. His tendency to see form and inspiration as separate entities--a view which caused him to disregard the principle of organic unity and led him to overlook metaphysical subtleties--hindered him in his attempts to evaluate poetry that did not follow conventional patterns.

Higginson made no new contributions to critical theory, but he utilized existing ideas with considerable understanding, sensing the strength and weakness of the developing American literature. His values rest in his realization that form was needed by the new literature, that it as a national literature should express the American theme. His invaluable accounts of his contemporaries also constitute a great gift to later scholars. No one interested in American literature can not read him thoroughly without amazement at the wealth of insight and knowledge he offers. He should not be "pigeon-holed" and merely labeled "genteel" as has so often been his fate since he, along with the more conventional idealists, became a victim of the realists who favored naturalism. We need not

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accept his optimism, but we can learn from him the importance of an eclectic view that expects purpose, form, and originality to be manifest in our literature.

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