

Certainly, anyhow, the United States do not so far utter poetry, first-rate literature, or any of the so-call'd arts, to any lofty admiration or advantage--are not dominated or penetrated from actual inherence or plain bent to the said poetry and arts. Other work, other needs, current inventions, productions, have occupied and to-day mainly occupy them. They are very 'cute and imitative and proud--can't bear being left too glaringly away far behind the other high-class nations--and so we set up some home "poets," "artists," painters, musicians, literati, and so forth, all our own (thus claim'd.) The whole matter has gone on, and exists to-day, probably as it should have been, and should be; as, for the present, it must be. To all which we conclude, and repeat the terrible query: American National Literature--is there distinctively any such thing, or can there ever be?

Note:

[46] The essay was for the North American Review, in answer to the formal request of the editor. It appear'd in March, 1891.

GATHERING THE CORN

Last of October.--Now mellow, crisp, Autumn days, bright moonlight nights, and gathering the corn--"cutting up," as the farmers call it. Now, or of late, all over the country, a certain green and brown-drab eloquence seeming to call out, "You that pretend to give the news, and all that's going, why not give us a notice?" Truly, O fields, as for the notice,

"Take, we give it willingly."

Only we must do it our own way. Leaving the domestic, dietary, and commercial parts of the question (which are enormous, in fact, hardly second to those of any other of our great soil-products), we will just saunter down a lane we know, on an average West Jersey farm, and let the fancy of the hour itemize America's most typical agricultural show and specialty.

Gathering the Corn--the British call it Maize, the old Yankee farmer Indian Corn. The great plumes, the ears well-envelop'd in their husks, the long and pointed leaves, in summer, like green or purple ribands, with a yellow stem line in the middle, all now turn'd dingy; the sturdy stalks, and the rustling in the breeze--the breeze itself well tempering the sunny noon--The varied reminiscences recall'd--the ploughing and planting in spring--(the whole family in the field, even the little girls and boys dropping seed in the hill)--the gorgeous sight through July and August--the walk and observation early in the day--the cheery call of the robin, and the low whirr of insects in the

grass--the Western husking party, when ripe--the November moonlight gathering, and the calls, songs, laughter of the young fellows.

Not to forget, hereabouts, in the Middle States, the old worm fences, with the gray rails and their scabs of moss and lichen--those old rails, weather beaten, but strong yet. Why not come down from literary dignity, and confess we are sitting on one now, under the shade of a great walnut tree? Why not confide that these lines are pencill'd on the edge of a woody bank, with a glistening pond and creek seen through the trees south, and the corn we are writing about close at hand on the north? Why not put in the delicious scent of the "life everlasting" that yet lingers so profusely in every direction--the chromatic song of the one persevering locust (the insect is scarcer this fall and the past summer than for many years) beginning slowly, rising and swelling to much emphasis, and then abruptly falling--so appropriate to the scene, so quaint, so racy and suggestive in the warm sunbeams, we could sit here and look and listen for an hour? Why not even the tiny, turtle-shaped, yellow-back'd, black-spotted lady-bug that has lit on the shirt-sleeve of the arm inditing this? Ending our list with the fall-drying grass, the Autumn days themselves,

Sweet days; so cool, so calm, so bright,

(yet not so cool either, about noon)--the horse-mint, the wild carrot, the mullein, and the bumble-bee.

How the half-mad vision of William Blake--how the far freer, far firmer fantasy that wrote "Midsummer Night's Dream"--would have revell'd night or day, and beyond stint, in one of our American corn fields! Truly, in color, outline, material and spiritual suggestiveness, where any more inclosing theme for idealist, poet, literary artist?

What we have written has been at noon day--but perhaps better still (for this collation,) to steal off by yourself these fine nights, and go slowly, musingly down the lane, when the dry and green-gray frost-touch'd leaves seem whisper-gossipping all over the field in low tones, as if every hill had something to say--and you sit or lean recluse near by, and inhale that rare, rich, ripe and peculiar odor of the gather'd plant which comes out best only to the night air. The complex impressions of the far-spread fields and woods in the night, are blended mystically, soothingly, indefinitely, and yet palpably to you (appealing curiously, perhaps mostly, to the sense of smell.) All is comparative silence and clear-shadow below, and the stars are up there with Jupiter lording it over westward; sulky Saturn in the east, and over head the moon. A rare well-shadow'd hour! By no means the least of the eligibilities of the gather'd corn!