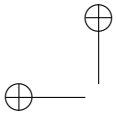
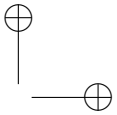
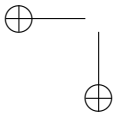
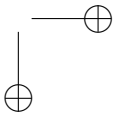
WOODROW WILSON
ON
WALTER BAGEHOT

WOODROW WILSON
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Edited by Isaac Waisberg

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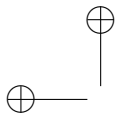
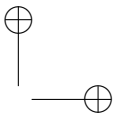

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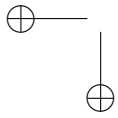
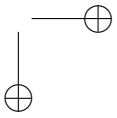

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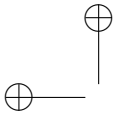
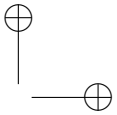
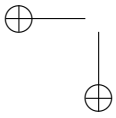
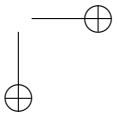





A LITERARY POLITICIAN*

"Literary politician" is not a label much in vogue, and may need first of all a justification, lest even the man of whom I am about to speak should decline it from his very urn. I do not mean a politician who affects literature; who seems to appreciate the solemn moral purpose of Wordsworth's Happy Warrior, and yet is opposed to ballot reform. Neither do I mean a literary man who affects politics; who earns his victories through the publishers, and his defeats at the hands of the men who control the primaries. I mean the man who has the genius to see deep into affairs, and the discretion to keep out of them, – the man to whom, by reason of knowledge and imagination and sympathy, governments and policies are as open books, but who, instead of trying to put haphazard characters of his own into those books, wisely prefers to read their pages aloud to others. A man this who knows politics, and yet does not handle policies.

There is, no doubt, a very widespread skepticism as to the existence of such a man. Many people would

* *The Atlantic*, November 1895.

ask you to prove him as well as define him; and that, as they assume, upon a very obvious principle. It is a rule of universal acceptance in theatrical circles that no one can write a good play who has no practical acquaintance with the stage. A knowledge of greenroom possibilities and of stage machinery, it is held, must go before all successful attempts to put either passion or humor into action on the boards, if pit and gallery are to get a sense of reality from the performance. No wonder that Sheridan's plays were effective, for Sheridan was both author and actor; but abundant wonder that simple Goldsmith succeeded with his exquisite She Stoops to Conquer, – unless we are to suppose that an Irishman of the last century, like the Irishman of this, had some sixth sense which enabled him to understand other people's business better than his own; for poor Goldsmith could not act (even off the stage), and his only connection with the theatre seems to have been his acquaintance with Garrick. Lytton, we know, had Macready constantly at his elbow, to give and enforce suggestions calculated to render plays playable. And in our own day, the authors of what we indulgently call dramatic literature find themselves constantly obliged to turn tragedies into comedies, comedies into farces, to satisfy the managers; for managers know the stage, and pretend to know all possible audiences also. The writer for the stage must be playwright first, author second.

Similar principles of criticism are not a little affected by those who play the parts, great and small, on the

stage of politics. There is on that stage, too, it is said, a complex machinery of action and scene-shifting, a greenroom tradition and practice as to costume and make-up, as to entry and exit, necessities of concession to footlights and of appeal to the pit, quite as rigorous and quite as proper for study as are the concomitants of that other art which we frankly call acting. This is an idea, indeed, accepted in some quarters outside the political playhouse as well as within it. Mr. Sidney Colvin, for example, declares very rightly that –

"Men of letters and of thought are habitually too much given to declaiming at their ease against the delinquencies of men of action and affairs. The inevitable friction of practical politics," he argues, "generates heat enough already, and the office of the thinker and critic should be to supply, not heat, but light. The difficulties which attend his own unmolested task – the task of seeking after and proclaiming salutary truths – should teach him to make allowance for the far more urgent difficulties which beset the politician; the man obliged, amidst the clash of interests and temptations, to practice from hand to mouth, and at his peril, the most uncertain and at the same time the most indispensable of the experimental arts."

Mr. Colvin is himself of the class of men of letters and of thought; he accordingly puts the case against his class rather mildly, – much more mildly than the practical politician would desire to see it put. Practical politicians are wont to regard closeted writers upon politics with a certain condescension, dashed with

slight traces of apprehension, or at least of uneasy concern. "Literary men can say strong things of their age," observes Mr. Bagehot, "for no one expects that they will go out and act on them. They are a kind of ticket-of-leave lunatics, from whom no harm is for the moment expected; who seem quiet, but on whose vagaries a practical public must have its eye." I suppose that the really serious, practical man in politics would see nothing of satirical humor in this description. He would have you note that, although traced with a sharp point of wit, the picture is nevertheless true. He can cite you a score of instances illustrative of the danger of putting faith in the political judgments of those who are not politicians bred in the shrewd and moving world of political management.

The genuine practical politician, such as (even our enemies being the witnesses) we must be acknowledged to produce in great numbers and perfection in this country, reserves his acidest contempt for the literary man who assumes to utter judgments touching public affairs and political institutions. If he be a reading man, as will sometimes happen, he is able to point you, in illustration of what you are to expect in such cases, to the very remarkable essays of the late Mr. Matthew Arnold on parliamentary policy and the Irish question. If he be not a reading man, as sometimes happens, he is able to ask, much to your confusion, "What does a fellow who lives inside a library know about politics, anyhow?" You have to admit, if you are candid, that most fellows who live in libraries know little enough.

You remember Macaulay, and acknowledge that, although he made admirable speeches in Parliament, held high political office, and knew all the considerable public men of his time, he did imagine the creation to have been made in accordance with Whig notions; did hope to find the judgments of Lord Somers some day answering mankind as standards for all possible times and circumstances. You recall Gibbon, and allow, to your own thought at least, that, had he not remained silent in his seat, a very few of his sentences would probably have sufficed to freeze the House of Commons stiff. The ordinary literary man, even though he be an eminent historian, is ill enough fitted to be a mentor in affairs of government. For, it must be admitted, things are for the most part very simple in books, and in practical life very complex. Not all the bindings of a library inclose the various world of circumstance.

But the practical politician should discriminate. Let him find a man with an imagination which, though it stands aloof, is yet quick to conceive the very things in the thick of which the politician struggles. To that man he should resort for instruction. And that there is occasionally such a man we have proof in Bagehot, the man who first clearly distinguished the facts of the English constitution from its theory.

Walter Bagehot is a name known to not a few of those who have a zest for the juiciest things of literature, for the wit that illuminates and the knowledge that refreshes. But his fame is still singularly disproportioned to his charm; and one feels once and again

like publishing him at least to all spirits of his own kind. It would be a most agreeable good fortune to introduce Bagehot to men who have not read him! To ask your friend to know Bagehot is like inviting him to seek pleasure. Occasionally, a man is born into the world whose mission it evidently is to clarify the thought of his generation, and to vivify it; to give it speed where it is slow, vision where it is blind, balance where it is out of poise, saving humor where it is dry, – and such a man was Walter Bagehot. When he wrote of history, he made it seem human and probable; when he wrote of political economy, he made it seem credible, entertaining, – nay, engaging, even; when he wrote criticism, he wrote sense. You have in him a man who can jest to your instruction, who will beguile you into being informed beyond your wont and wise beyond your birthright. Full of manly, straightforward meaning, earnest to find the facts that guide and strengthen conduct, a lover of good men and seers, full of knowledge and a consuming desire for it, he is yet genial withal, with the geniality of a man of wit, and alive in every fibre of him, with a life he can communicate to you. One is constrained to agree, almost, with the verdict of a witty countryman of his, who happily still lives to cheer us, that when Bagehot died he "carried away into the next world more originality of thought than is now to be found in the three Estates of the Realm."

An epitome of Bagehot's life can be given very briefly. He was born in February, 1826, and died in March,

1877, the month in which one would prefer to die. Between those two dates he had much quaint experience as a boy, and much sober business experience as a man. He wrote essays on poets, prose writers, statesmen, whom he would, with abundant insight, but without too much respect of persons; also books on banking, on the early development of society, and on English politics, kindling a flame of interest with these dry materials such as made men stare who had often described the facts of society themselves, but who had never dreamed of applying fire to them, as Bagehot did, to make them give forth light and wholesome heat. He set the minds of a few fortunate friends aglow with the delights of the very wonderful tongue which nature had given him through his mother. And then he died, while his power was yet young. Not a life of event or adventure, but a life of deep interest, none the less, because a life in which those two things of our modern life, commonly deemed incompatible, business and literature, namely, were combined without detriment to either; and from which, more interesting still, politics gained a profound expounder in one who was no politician and no party man, but, as he himself said, "between sizes in politics."

Mr. Bagehot was born in the centre of Somersetshire, that southwestern county of old England whose coast towns look across Bristol Channel to the highlands of Wales: a county of small farms, and pastures that keep their promise of fatness to many generous milkers; a county broken into abrupt hills, and sodden moors

hardly kept from the inroads of the sea, as well as rural valleys open to the sun; a county visited by mists from the sea, and bathed in a fine soft atmosphere all its own; visited also by people of fashion, for it contains Bath; visited now also by those who have read Lorna Doone, for within it lies part of that Exmoor Forest in which stalwart John Ridd lived and wrought his mighty deeds of strength and love: a land which the Celts kept for long against both Saxon and Roman, but which Christianity easily conquered, building Wells Cathedral and the monastery at Glastonbury. Nowhere else, in days of travel, could Bagehot find a land of so great delight save in the northwest corner of Spain, where a golden light lay upon everything, where the sea shone with a rare, soft lustre, and where there was a like varied coast-line to that he knew and loved at home. He called it "a sort of better Devonshire:" and Devonshire is Somersetshire, – only more so! The atmospheric effects of his county certainly entered the boy Bagehot, and colored the nature of the man. He had its glow, its variety, its richness, and its imaginative depth.

But better than a fair county is a good parentage, and that, too, Bagehot had; just the parentage one would wish to have who desired to be a force in the world's thought. His father, Thomas Watson Bagehot, was for thirty years managing director and vice-president of Stuckey's Banking Company, one of the oldest and best of those sturdy joint-stock companies which have for so many years stood stoutly up

alongside the Bank of England as managers of the vast English fortune. But he was something more than a banker. He was a man of mind, of strong liberal convictions in politics, and of an abundant knowledge of English history wherewith to back up his opinions. He was one of the men who think, and who think in straight lines; who see, and see things. His mother was a Miss Stuckey, a niece of the founder of the banking company. But it was not her connection with bankers that made her an invaluable mother. She had, besides beauty, a most lively and stimulating wit; such a mind as we most desire to see in a woman, – a mind that stirs without irritating you, that rouses but does not belabor, amuses and yet subtly instructs. She could preside over the young life of her son in such a way as at once to awaken his curiosity and set him in the way of satisfying it. She was brilliant company for a boy, and rewarding for a man. She had suggestive people, besides, among her kinsmen, into whose companionship she could bring her son. Bagehot had that for which no university can ever offer an equivalent, – the constant and intelligent sympathy of both his parents in his studies, and their companionship in his tastes. To his father's strength his mother added vivacity. He would have been wise, perhaps, without her; but he would not have been wise so delightfully.

Bagehot got his schooling in Bristol, his university training in London. In Bristol lived Dr. Prichard, his mother's brother-in-law, and author of a notable book on the Races of Men. From him Bagehot unquestion-

ably got his bent towards the study of race origins and development. In London, Cobden and Bright were carrying on an important part of their great agitation for the repeal of the corn laws, and were making such speeches as it stirred and bettered young men to hear. Bagehot had gone to University Hall, London, rather than to Oxford or Cambridge, because his father was a Unitarian, and would not have his son submit to the religious tests then required at the great universities. But there can be no doubt that there was more to be had at University Hall in that day than at either Oxford or Cambridge. Oxford and Cambridge were still dragging the very heavy chains of a hindering tradition; the faculty of University Hall contained many thorough and some eminent scholars; what was more, University Hall was in London, and London itself was a quickening and inspiring teacher for a lad in love with both books and affairs, as Bagehot was. He could ask penetrating questions of his professors, and he could also ask questions of London, seek out her secrets of history, and so experience to the full the charm of her abounding life. In after-years, though he loved Somersetshire and clung to it with a strong home-keeping affection, he could never stay away from London for more than six weeks at a time. Eventually he made it his place of permanent residence.

His university career over, Bagehot did what so many thousands of young graduates before him had done, – he studied for the bar; and then, having prepared himself to practice law, followed another large

body of young men in deciding to abandon it. He joined his father in his business as ship-owner and banker in Somersetshire, and after a time succeeded to the office of vice-president of the banking company. For the rest of his life, this man, whom the world knows as a man of letters, was first of all a man of business. In his later years, however, he identified himself with what may be called the literary side of business by becoming editor of that great financial authority, the London Economist. He had, so to say, married into this position. His wife was the daughter of the Rt. Hon. James Wilson, who was the mind and manager, as well as the founder, of the Economist. Wilson's death seemed to leave the great financial weekly by natural succession to Bagehot, and certainly natural selection never made a better choice. It was under Bagehot that the Economist became a sort of financial providence for business men on both sides of the Atlantic. Its sagacious prescience constituted Bagehot himself a sort of supplementary chancellor of the exchequer, the chancellors of both parties resorting to him with equal confidence and solicitude. His constant contact with London, and with the leaders of politics and opinion there, of course materially assisted him also to those penetrating judgments touching the structure and working of English institutions which have made his volume on the English Constitution and his essays on Bolingbroke and Brougham and Peel, on Mr. Gladstone and Sir George Cornewall Lewis, the admiration and despair of all who have read them.

Those who know Bagehot only as the writer of some of the most delightful and suggestive literary criticisms in the language wonder that he should have been an authority on practical politics; those who used to regard the London Economist as omniscient, and who knew him only as the editor of it, marvel that he dabbled in literary criticism, and incline to ask themselves, when they learn of his vagaries in that direction, whether he can have been so safe a guide as they deemed him, after all; those who know him through his political writings alone venture upon the perusal of his miscellaneous writings with not a little surprise and misgiving that their master should wander so far afield. And yet the whole Bagehot is the only Bagehot. Each part of the man is incomplete, not only, but a trifle incomprehensible, also, without the other parts. What delights us most in his literary essays is their broad practical sagacity, so uniquely married as it is with pure taste and the style of a rapid artist in words. What makes his financial and political writings whole and sound is the scope of his mind outside finance and politics, the validity of his observation all around the circle of thought and affairs. There is constant balance, there is just perspective everywhere. He was the better critic for being a competent man of business and a trusted financial authority. He was the more sure-footed in his political judgments because of his play of mind in other and supplementary spheres of human activity.

The very appearance of the man was a sort of outer index to the singular variety of capacity that has made him so notable a figure in the literary annals of England. A mass of black, wavy hair; a dark eye, with depths full of slumberous, playful fire; a ruddy skin that bespoke active blood, quick in its rounds; the lithe figure of an excellent horseman; a nostril, full, delicate, quivering, like that of a blooded racer, – such were the fitting outward marks of a man in whom life and thought and fancy abounded; the aspect of a man of unflagging vivacity, of wholesome, hearty humor, of a ready intellectual sympathy, of wide and penetrative observation. It is no narrow, logical shrewdness or cold penetration that looks forth at you through that face, even if a bit of mockery does lurk in the privatest corner of the eye. Among the qualities which he seeks out for special praise in Shakespeare is a broad tolerance and sympathy for illogical and common minds. It seems to him an evidence of size in Shakespeare that he was not vexed with smallness, but was patient, nay, sympathetic even, in his portrayal of it. "If every one were logical and literary," he exclaims, "how would there be scavengers, or watchmen, or caulkers, or coopers? A patient sympathy, a kindly fellow-feeling for the narrow intelligence necessarily induced by narrow circumstances, – a narrowness which, in some degrees, seems to be inevitable, and is perhaps more serviceable than most things to the wise conduct of life, – this, though quick and half-bred minds may despise it, seems to be a necessary constituent in the composition

of manifold genius. 'How shall the world be served?' asks the host in Chaucer. We must have cart-horses as well as race-horses, draymen as well as poets. It is no bad thing, after all, to be a slow man and to have one idea a year. You don't make a figure, perhaps, in argumentative society, which requires a quicker species of thought, but is that the worse?"

One of the things which strikes us most in Bagehot himself is his capacity to understand inferior minds; and there can be no better test of sound genius. He stood in the midst of affairs, and knew the dull duty and humdrum fidelity which make up the equipment of the ordinary mind for business, for the business which keeps the world steady in its grooves and makes it fit for habitation. He perceived quite calmly, though with an odd, sober amusement, that the world is under the dominion, in most things, of the average man, and the average man he knows. He is, he explains, with his characteristic covert humor, "a cool, common person, with a considerate air, with figures in his mind, with his own business to attend to, with a set of ordinary opinions arising from and suited to ordinary life. He can't bear novelty or originalities. He says, 'Sir, I never heard such a thing before in my life;' and he thinks this a *reductio ad absurdum*. You may see his taste by the reading of which he approves. Is there a more splendid monument of talent and industry than the Times? No wonder that the average man – that any one – believes in it.... But did you ever see anything there you had never seen before? ... Where

are the deep theories, and the wise axioms, and the everlasting sentiments which the writers of the most influential publication in the world have been the first to communicate to an ignorant species? Such writers are far too shrewd. . . . The purchaser desires an article which he can appreciate at sight, which he can lay down and say, 'An excellent article, very excellent; exactly my own sentiments.' Original theories give trouble; besides, a grave man on the Coal Exchange does not desire to be an apostle of novelties among the contemporaneous dealers in fuel; he wants to be provided with remarks he can make on the topics of the day which will not be known not to be his, that are not too profound, which he can fancy the paper only reminded him of. And just in the same way," – thus he proceeds with the sagacious moral, – "precisely as the most popular political paper is not that which is abstractedly the best or most instructive, but that which most exactly takes up the minds of men where it finds them, catches the floating sentiment of society, puts it in such a form as society can fancy would convince another society which did not believe, so the most influential of constitutional statesmen is the one who most felicitously expresses the creed of the moment, who administers it, who embodies it in laws and institutions, who gives it the highest life it is capable of, who induces the average man to think, 'I could not have done it any better if I had had time myself.' "

See how his knowledge of politics proceeds out of his knowledge of men. "You may talk of the tyranny of Nero and Tiberius," he exclaims, "but the real tyranny is the tyranny of your next-door neighbor. What law is so cruel as the law of doing what he does? What yoke is so galling as the necessity of being like him? What espionage of despotism comes to your door so effectually as the eye of the man who lives at your door? Public opinion is a permeating influence, and it exacts obedience to itself; it requires us to think other men's thoughts, to speak other men's words, to follow other men's habits. Of course, if we do not, no formal ban issues, no corporeal pain, the coarse penalty of a barbarous society, is inflicted on the offender, but we are called 'eccentric;' there is a gentle murmur of 'most unfortunate ideas, singular young man,' 'well intentioned, I dare say, but unsafe, sir, quite unsafe.' The prudent, of course, conform."

There is, no doubt, a touch of mockery in all this, but there is unquestionable insight in it, too, and a sane knowledge also of the fact that dull, common judgments are, after all, the cement of society. It is Bagehot who says somewhere that it is only dull nations, like the Romans and the English, who can become or remain for any length of time self-governing nations, because it is only among them that duty is done through lack of knowledge sufficient or imagination enough to suggest anything else to do; only among them that the stability of slow habit can be had.

It would be superficial criticism to put forward Bagehot's political opinions as themselves the proof of his extraordinary power as a student and analyst of institutions. His life, his broad range of study, his quick versatility, his shrewd appreciation of common men, his excursions through all the fields that men traverse in their thought of one another and in their contact with the world's business, – these are the soil out of which his political judgments spring, from which they get their sap and bloom. In order to know institutions, you must know men; you must be able to imagine histories, to appreciate characters radically unlike your own, to see into the heart of society and assess its notions, great and small. Your average critic, it must be acknowledged, would be the worst possible commentator on affairs. He has all the movements of intelligence without any of its reality. But a man who sees authors with a Chaucerian insight into them as men, who knows literature as a realm of vital thought conceived by real men, of actual motive felt by concrete persons, this is a man whose opinions you may confidently ask, if not on current politics, at any rate on all that concerns the permanent relations of men in society.

It is for such reasons that one must first make known the most masterly of the critics of English political institutions as a man of catholic tastes and attainments, shrewdly observant of many kinds of men and affairs. Know him once in this way, and his mastery in political thought is explained. If I were to make choice,

therefore, of extracts from his works with a view to recommend him as a politician, I should choose those passages which show him a man of infinite capacity to see and understand men of all kinds, past and present. By showing in his case the equipment of a mind open on all sides to the life and thought of society, and penetrative of human secrets of many sorts, I should authenticate his credentials as a writer upon politics, which is nothing else than the public and organic life of society.

Examples may be taken almost at random. There is the passage on Sydney Smith, in the essay on The First Edinburgh Reviewers. We have all laughed with that great-hearted clerical wit; but it is questionable whether we have all appreciated him as a man who wrote and wrought wisdom. Indeed, Sydney Smith may be made a very delicate test of sound judgment, the which to apply to friends of whom you are suspicious. There was a man beneath those excellent witticisms, a big, wholesome, thinking man; but none save men of like wholesome natures can see and value his manhood and his mind at their real worth.

"Sydney Smith was an after-dinner writer. His words have a flow, a vigor, an expression, which is not given to hungry mortals.... There is little trace of labor in his composition; it is poured forth like an unceasing torrent, rejoicing daily to run its course. And what courage there is in it! There is as much variety of pluck in writing across a sheet as in riding across a country. Cautious men ... go tremulously, like

a timid rider; they turn hither and thither; they do not go straight across a subject, like a masterly mind. A few sentences are enough for a master of sentences. The writing of Sydney Smith is suited to the broader kind of important questions. For anything requiring fine nicety of speculation, long elaborateness of deduction, evanescent sharpness of distinction, neither his style nor his mind was fit. He had no patience for long argument, no acuteness for delicate precision, no fangs for recondite research. Writers, like teeth, are divided into incisors and grinders. Sydney Smith was a molar. He did not run a long, sharp argument into the interior of a question; he did not, in the common phrase, go deeply into it; but he kept it steadily under the contact of a strong, capable, jawlike understanding, – pressing its surface, effacing its intricacies, grinding it down. Yet this is done without toil. The play of the molar is instinctive and placid; he could not help it; it would seem that he had an enjoyment in it."

One reads this with a feeling that Bagehot both knows and likes Sydney Smith, and heartily appreciates him as an engine of Whig thought; and with the conviction that Bagehot himself, knowing thus and enjoying Smith's free-hand method of writing, could have done the like himself, – could himself have made English ring to all the old Whig tunes, like an anvil under the hammer. And yet you have only to turn back a page in the same essay to find quite another Bagehot, a Bagehot such as Sydney Smith could not have been. He is speaking of that other militant Edin-

burgh reviewer, Lord Jeffrey, and is recalling, as every one recalls, Jeffrey's review of Wordsworth's Excursion. The first words of that review, as everybody remembers, were, "This will never do;" and there followed upon those words, though not a little praise of the poetical beauties of the poem, a thoroughly meant condemnation of the school of poets of which Wordsworth was the greatest representative. Very celebrated in the world of literature is the leading case of Jeffrey v. Wordsworth. It is in summing up this case that Bagehot gives us a very different taste of his quality:

"The world has given judgment. Both Mr. Wordsworth and Lord Jeffrey have received their reward. The one had his own generation, the laughter of men, the applause of drawing-rooms, the concurrence of the crowd; the other a succeeding age, the fond enthusiasm of secret students, the lonely rapture of lonely minds. And each has received according to his kind. If all cultivated men speak differently because of the existence of Wordsworth and Coleridge; if not a thoughtful English book has appeared for forty years without some trace for good or evil of their influence; if sermon-writers subsist upon their thoughts; if 'sacred poets' thrive by translating their weaker portions into the speech of women; if, when all this is over, some sufficient part of their writing will ever be found fitting food for wild musing and solitary meditation, surely this is because they possessed the inner nature, – 'an intense and glowing mind,' 'the vision and the faculty divine.' But if, perchance, in their weaker moments, the great

authors of the Lyrical Ballads did ever imagine that the world was to pause because of their verses, that Peter Bell would be popular in drawing-rooms, that Christabel would be perused in the city, that people of fashion would make a bandbook of The Excursion, it was well for them to be told at once that this was not so. Nature ingeniously prepared a shrill artificial voice, which spoke in season and out of season, enough and more than enough, what will ever be the idea of the cities of the plain concerning those who live alone among the mountains, of the frivolous concerning the grave, of the gregarious concerning the recluse, of those who laugh concerning those who laugh not, of the common concerning the uncommon, of those who lend on usury concerning those who lend not; the notion of the world of those whom it will not reckon among the righteous, – it said, 'This won't do!' And so in all time will the lovers of polished Liberalism speak concerning the intense and lonely prophet."

This is no longer the Bagehot who could "write across a sheet" with Sydney Smith. It is now a Bagehot whose heart is turned away from the cudgeling Whigs to see such things as are hidden from the bearers of cudgels, and revealed only to those who can await in the sanctuary of a quiet mind the coming of the vision. Single specimens of such a man's writing do not suffice, of course, even as specimens. They need their context to show their appositeness, the full body of the writing from which they are taken to show the mass and system of the thought. Even separated pieces

of his matter prepare us, nevertheless, for finding in Bagehot keener, juster estimates of difficult historical and political characters than it is given the merely exact historian, with his head full of facts and his heart purged of all imagination, to speak. There is his estimate of the cavalier, for example: "A cavalier is always young. The buoyant life arises before us, rich in hope, strong in vigor, irregular in action: men young and ardent, framed in the prodigality of nature; open to every enjoyment, alive to every passion, eager, impulsive; brave without discipline, noble without principle; prizing luxury, despising danger; capable of high sentiment, but in each of whom the addiction was to courses vain;

> His companies unlettered, rude, and shallow;
> His hours filled up with riots, banquets, sports,
> And never noted in him any study,
> Any retirement, any sequestration
> From open haunts and popularity.

The political sentiment is part of the character; the essence of Toryism is enjoyment.... The way to keep up old customs is to enjoy old customs; the way to be satisfied with the present state of things is to enjoy the present state of things. Over the cavalier mind this world passes with a thrill of delight; there is an exultation in a daily event, zest in the 'regular thing,' joy at an old feast."

Is it not most natural that the writer of a passage like that should have been a consummate critic of politics,

seeing institutions through men, the only natural way? It was as necessary that he should be able to enjoy Sydney Smith and recognize the seer in Wordsworth as that he should be able to conceive the cavalier life and point of view; and in each perception there is the same power. He is as little at fault in understanding men of his own day. What would you wish better than his celebrated character of a "constitutional statesman," for example? "A constitutional statesman is a man of common opinions and uncommon abilities." Peel is his example. "His opinions resembled the daily accumulating insensible deposits of a rich alluvial soil. The great stream of time flows on with all things on its surface; and slowly, grain by grain, a mould of wise experience is unconsciously left on the still, extended intellect.... The stealthy accumulating words of Peel seem like the quiet leavings of some outward tendency, which brought these, but might as well have brought others. There is no peculiar stamp, either, on the ideas. They might have been any one's ideas. They belong to the general diffused stock of observations which are to be found in the civilized world.... He insensibly takes in and imbibes the ideas of those around him. If he were left in a vacuum, he would have no ideas."

What strikes one most, perhaps, in all these passages, is the realizing imagination which illuminates them. And it is an imagination with a practical character all its own. It is not a creating, but a conceiving imagination; not the imagination of the fancy, but the imagination of the understanding. Conceiving imagina-

tions, however, are of two kinds. For the one kind the understanding serves as a lamp of guidance; upon the other the understanding acts as an electric excitant, a keen irritant. Bagehot's was evidently of the first kind; Carlyle's, conspicuously of the second. There is something in common between the minds of these two men as they conceive society. Both have a capital grip upon the actual; both can conceive without confusion the complex phenomena of society; both send humorous glances of searching insight into the hearts of men. But it is the difference between the men that most arrests our attention. Bagehot has the scientific imagination, Carlyle the passionate. Bagehot is the embodiment of witty common sense; all the movements of his mind illustrate that vivacious sanity which he has himself called animated moderation. Carlyle, on the other hand, conceives men and their motives too often with a hot intolerance; there is heat in his imagination, – a heat that sometimes scorches and consumes. Life is for him dramatic, full of fierce, imperative forces. Even when the world rings with laughter, it is laughter which, in his ears, is succeeded by an echo of mockery; laughter which is but a defiance of tears. The actual which you touch in Bagehot is the practical, operative actual of a world of workshops and parliaments, – a world of which workshops and parliaments are the natural and desirable products. Carlyle flouts at modern legislative assemblies as "talking shops," and yearns for action such as is commanded by masters of action; preaches the doctrine of work and silence in some thirty vol-

umes octavo. Bagehot points out that prompt, crude action is the instinct and practice of the savage; that talk, the deliberation of assemblies, the slow concert of masses of men, is the cultivated fruit of civilization, nourishing to all the powers of right action in a society which is not simple and primitive, but advanced and complex. He is no more imposed upon by parliamentary debates than Carlyle is. He knows that they are stupid, and, so far as wise utterance goes, in large part futile, too. But he is not irritated, as Carlyle is, for, to say the fact, he sees more than Carlyle sees. He sees the force and value of the stupidity. He is wise, along with Burke, in regarding prejudice as the cement of society. He knows that slow thought is the ballast of a self-governing state. Stanch, knitted timbers are as necessary to the ship as sails. Unless the hull is conservative in holding stubbornly together in the face of every argument of sea weather, there'll be lives and fortunes lost. Bagehot can laugh at unreasoning bias. It brings a merry twinkle into his eye to undertake the good sport of dissecting stolid stupidity. But he would not for the world abolish bias and stupidity. He would much rather have society hold together; much rather see it grow than undertake to reconstruct it. "You remember my joke against you about the moon," writes Sydney Smith to Jeffrey; "d–n the solar system – bad light – planets too distant – pestered with comets – feeble contrivance; could make a better with great ease." There was nothing of this in Bagehot. He was inclined to be quite tolerant of the solar system. He

understood that society was more quickly bettered by sympathy than by antagonism.

Bagehot's limitations, though they do not obtrude themselves upon your attention as his excellencies do, are in truth as sharp-cut and clear as his thought itself. It would not be just the truth to say that his power is that of critical analysis only, for he can and does construct thought concerning antique and obscure systems of political life and social action. But it is true that he does not construct for the future. You receive stimulation from him and a certain feeling of elation. There is a fresh air stirring in all his utterances that is unspeakably refreshing. You open your mind to the fine influence, and feel younger for having been in such an atmosphere. It is an atmosphere clarified and bracing almost beyond example elsewhere. But you know what you lack in Bagehot if you have read Burke. You miss the deep eloquence which awakens purpose. You are not in contact with systems of thought or with principles that dictate action, but only with a perfect explanation. You would go to Burke, not to Bagehot, for inspiration in the infinite tasks of self-government, though you would, if you were wise, go to Bagehot rather than to Burke if you wished to realize just what were the practical daily conditions under which those tasks were to be worked out.

Moreover, there is a deeper lack in Bagehot. He has no sympathy with the voiceless body of the people, with the "mass of unknown men." He conceives the work of government to be a work which is possible only

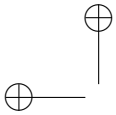
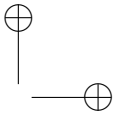
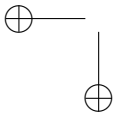
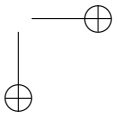
to the instructed few. He would have the mass served, and served with devotion, but he would tremble to see them attempt to serve themselves. He has not the stout fibre and the unquestioning faith in the right and capacity of inorganic majorities which makes the democrat. He has none of the heroic boldness necessary for faith in wholesale political aptitude and capacity. He takes democracy in detail in his thought, and to take it in detail makes it look very awkward indeed.

And yet surely it would not occur to the veriest democrat that ever vociferated the sovereignty of the people to take umbrage at anything Bagehot might chance to say in dissection of democracy. What he says is seldom provokingly true. There is something in it all that is better than a "saving clause," and that is a saving humor. Humor ever keeps the whole of his matter sound; it is an excellent salt that keeps sweet the sharpest of his sayings. Indeed, Bagehot's wit is so prominent among his gifts that I am tempted here to enter a general plea for wit as fit company for high thoughts and weighty subjects. Wit does not make a subject light; it simply beats it into shape to be handled readily. For my part, I make free acknowledgment that no man seems to me master of his subject who cannot take liberties with it; who cannot slap his propositions on the back and be hail-fellow well met with them. Suspect a man of shallowness who always takes himself and all that he thinks seriously. For light on a dark subject commend me to a ray of wit. Most of your solemn explanations are mere farthing candles

in the great expanse of a difficult question. Wit is not, I admit, a steady light, but ah! its flashes give you sudden glimpses of unsuspected things such as you will never see without it. It is the summer lightning, which will bring more to your startled eye in an instant, out of the hiding of the night, than you will ever be at the pains to observe in the full blaze of noon.

Wit is movement, is play of mind; and the mind cannot get play without a sufficient playground. Without movement outside the world of books, it is impossible a man should see aught but the very neatly arranged phenomena of that world. But it is possible for a man's thought to be instructed by the world of affairs without the man himself becoming a part of it. Indeed, it is exceedingly hard for one who is in and of it to hold the world of affairs off at arm's length and observe it. He has no vantage-ground. He had better for a while seek the distance of books, and get his perspective. The literary politician, let it be distinctly said, is a very fine, a very superior species of the man thoughtful. He reads books as he would listen to men talk. He stands apart, and looks on, with humorous, sympathetic smile, at the play of policies. He will tell you for the asking what the players are thinking about. He divines at once how the parts are cast. He knows beforehand what each act is to discover. He might readily guess what the dialogue is to contain. Were you short of scene-shifters, he could serve you admirably in an emergency. And he is a better critic of the play than the players.

Had I command of the culture of men, I should wish to raise up for the instruction and stimulation of my nation more than one sane, sagacious, penetrative critic of men and affairs like Walter Bagehot. But that, of course. The proper thesis to draw from his singular genius is this: It is not the constitutional lawyer, nor the student of the mere machinery and legal structure of institutions, nor the politician, a mere handler of that machinery, who is competent to understand and expound government; but the man who finds the materials for his thought far and wide, in everything that reveals character and circumstance and motive. It is necessary to stand with the poets as well as with lawgivers; with the fathers of the race as well as with your neighbor of to-day; with those who toil and are sick at heart as well as with those who prosper and laugh and take their pleasure; with the merchant and the manufacturer as well as with the closeted student; with the schoolmaster and with those whose only school is life; with the orator and with the men who have wrought always in silence; in the midst of thought and also in the midst of affairs, if you would really comprehend those great wholes of history and of character which are the vital substance of politics.

A WIT AND A SEER*

We are often very glib and confident in our generalizations about the characteristics of the English race, – not noting, perhaps not caring to note when the mood for generalization is upon us, how many individuals of that race escape our classification and show what qualities they please. Under which characteristic of that sturdy and for the most part matter-of-fact people do we place its extraordinary fecundity in every kind of individual genius? Is Shakespeare a typical product, or is he not, – or has the race changed since the sunny and open times of great Elizabeth? Is Milton more natural and native in his kind? It is not a gay nation, nor yet is it saturnine, nor always sober. If it sometimes laugh, it is always in earnest. But it has produced some – nay, a great many – most excellent wits.

No doubt this might be made a mystery, if we chose. The great majority of Englishmen, it is safe to say, look upon a jest with uneasiness, and feel toward an habitual jester a deep distrust. They do not wish the

* *The Atlantic*, October 1898.

things they think about whipped into a syllabub, and they prefer to take counsel with grave and serious men, – as if life were all counsel, and all counsel matter of logic and calculation, with never a laugh in it anywhere. One recalls Sydney Smith's jest to his brother. "We have reversed the law of nature," he said: "you have risen by your gravity, and I have sunk by my levity." It deeply shocked Englishmen to find a clergyman given to jesting. And then there was Charles Lamb. How uncomfortable he made most sober men! How many good men thought him light-headed, besotted, a sort of whimsical, irreverent, unbalanced child, – and what pleasure he took in making them think so! He is delivered of their company now. He is read and loved in this day which is not his own only by the juster, clearer spirits, bred by nature to be like those who welcomed and relished his comradeship while he lived. This is a large and goodly company, and is likely always to be, God be praised; but it is not a representative company of Englishmen, any more than Lamb's immediate comrades were in his own generation. You must not demand of the ordinary man, even of the ordinary reading man, that he know his Lamb; and nobody is in the least likely to think of Lamb as of a typical English mind. You do not feel about him as you would feel about a French wit: ah, what a race for the fine turn of the phrase and for the poignant thrusts of a nice wit! And so Congreve and Sheridan seem to belong, of right, across the Channel, and you look to see English comedy, in all ordinary

seasons, produce its laugh by comic incident rather than by subtle jest or apt rejoinder.

The subject is a most alluring one, and yet very dangerous. Every prudent writer must avoid it. It defies analysis. No one can explain why the English race has brought forth so much genius of the lighter as well as of the graver sort, and enough readers to keep a wit in countenance. One must simply say that the fact is so, and discreetly pass on. The only excuse I can give for having ventured upon so elusive a topic is that Walter Bagehot was a wit as well as a seer, – one of the most original and audacious wits that the English race has produced, – and I wish to make a proper introduction to speaking of him. Moreover, being a wit, he seems himself to have perceived the incongruity of his being an Englishman. "I need not say," he wrote in his youth, "I need not say that in real sound stupidity the English people are unrivaled: you'll hear more wit and better wit in an Irish street row than would keep Westminster Hall in humor for five weeks."

Bagehot had no literary lineage behind him, nor anything very unusual in his bringing forth that would lead the historian of letters to expect him to be what he so delightfully turned out to be. Upon a plain street in the quiet little town of Langport, in the midst of Somersetshire, there stands a plain but broad and homelike house, with its threshold upon the very footway of the street; and here, in an upper room, Walter Bagehot was born, on the 3d of February, 1826. The house

is the residence of the manager of the Somersetshire bank whose offices are but a few rods away upon the same street, where it turns about toward Glastonbury and Wells. This was the business to which Bagehot was born. His father, Thomas Watson Bagehot, was vice-president of the private banking company which Mr. Samuel Stuckey had established there in Langport in the last century, and which had so prospered that its branches were after a while to be found in every considerable place in the county, – which was, indeed, destined to become in our own day the largest private bank of issue in England. The Stuckeys are still the magnates of the little town, the owners of ample green acres that stretch away northward and broaden from the hill which the parish church crowns and adorns.

Thomas Bagehot married a niece of Samuel Stuckey; but not before she had seen a good deal of the large world outside the sequestered town in which her great son was to be born. She had first married a Mr. Estlin, of Bristol; and her life and companionships in Bristol, that old city which had so teemed through more than one great age with commerce of the mind as well as with trade in the stuffs of the Indies and the ends of the earth, had enriched her lively mind not a little in the days when she was most susceptible. She was older than Mr. Bagehot by a goodly number of years, – perhaps it would be ungallant to say how many, – but she was not of the kind to grow old or stagnate, even if she had lived all her life in that quiet house in Langport; and her son, Walter Bagehot, took a good measure of genius by inheritance from her.

Somersetshire is a sunny county, and lies in the midst of that brightest part of England which is thrust with its rising coasts southward toward the heart of the Atlantic; but many dull wits are born thereabouts. For all there is so much poetry in the soft air, with its sun-lit mists and its fine mysterious distances, looking toward the sea, it has not bred many poets. Its levels of intelligence have in all ordinary seasons been nearly as flat and featureless as its own fat interior meadows, which used now and again to hold a flood of waters like the sea, with only here and there an island-hill, like that of Avalon, where monks built their abbey of Glastonbury. It is pleasant to see Langport also perched upon one of these infrequent hills, a landmark for the traveler, and to think that it was from this haven Walter Bagehot set out to make his bold voyage into the world of thought, – that "high-spirited, buoyant, subtle, speculative nature, in which the imaginative qualities were even more remarkable than the judgment," as one of his comrades and fellow voyagers has said, – a man of a "gay and dashing humor which was the life of every conversation in which he joined," and of a "visionary nature to which the commonest things often seemed the most marvelous, and the marvelous things the most intrinsically probable." This was the man who was to set the facts of English politics in their true light, – and not the facts of English politics only, but also many of the facts of the world's political development as well; for it is in the vision of such men that facts appear for what they are, – are seen to

consist not simply of what is in them, but also, and even more, of what is *behind* them and about them, their setting and atmosphere, and are seen not to be intelligible without these. No doubt it was a signal advantage to have had a very brilliant woman for his mother, as Bagehot had, – a woman who had come to the maturity of her charming gifts; and to have had so sterling a man as Thomas Bagehot for his father, – a man of cultivated power, and of great good sense and balance of judgment. But brilliant women are not always generous in giving wit to their sons, and the best of men have begot fools. Neither Somersetshire air nor any certain custom of mental inheritance can explain Walter Bagehot. We must simply accept him as part of the largess of Providence to a race singularly enriched with genius.

Nor is the breeding of the boy much to our purpose. He was not made by his breeding. His mind chose its own training, as such a mind always does, and made its own world of thought in the days of his formal schooling in Bristol and at University College, London, whither he went because his father would not have him stomach the religious tests then imposed at Oxford and Cambridge. Schools and colleges are admirable for drill and discipline of the mind, and give many an ordinary man his indispensable equipment for success; but that is not their use for the exceptional mind of genius. Such a mind does not accept their drill. It takes only their atmosphere, needs only the companionships they afford, uses them with a sort of sovereign selection

of what it desires. Bagehot has given us his own statement of the habit of such minds, in an article on Oxford Reform which he published in the Prospective Review for August, 1852. "In youth," he says, "the real plastic energy is not in tutors or lectures or in books 'got up,' but in Wordsworth and Shelley; in the books that all read because all like; in what all talk of because all are interested; in the argumentative walk or disputatious lounge; in the impact of young thought upon young thought, of fresh thought on fresh thought, of hot thought on hot thought; in mirth and refutation, in ridicule and laughter: for these are the free play of the natural mind, and these cannot be got without a college." "*These* cannot be got without a college"! Here is food for reflection for those who look to become men of thought by diligence in attending lectures and thoroughness in "getting up" examinations! No doubt Bagehot was writing thus out of his own experience, as Mr. R. H. Hutton says. Such minds make their own laws and ways of life, and the rest of us, being duller, must take care not to use prescriptions which do not suit our case. Mr. Hutton, who was Bagehot's college mate and lifelong friend, tells us that "youth, buoyancy, vivacity, velocity of thought, were of the essence of the impression he made. Such arrogance as he seemed to have in early life was the arrogance as much of enjoyment as of detachment of mind; the *insouciance* of the old Cavalier as much, at least, as the calm of a mind not accessible to the contagion of social feelings. He always talked, in youth, of his spirits as inconveniently

high; and once wrote to me that he did not think they were quite as 'boysterous' as they had been, and that his fellow creatures were not sorry for the abatement; nevertheless, he added, 'I am quite fat, gross, and ruddy.' He was indeed excessively fond of hunting, vaulting, and almost all muscular effort; so that his life would be wholly misconceived by any one who... should picture his mind as a vigilantly observant, far-away intelligence, – such as Hawthorne's, for example. He liked to be in the thick of the *mêlée* when talk grew warm, though he was never so absorbed in it as not to keep his mind cool." He liked to talk, indeed, even when there was no one to talk to but himself; for there are elderly men still to be found at the bank in Langport who remember the overflowing vivacity of the bank's one-time director, and recall how he could oftentimes be overheard talking to himself in his characteristic eager fashion, as he paced all alone up and down the director's room, in the intervals of business. He was a sore puzzle to the sober citizens of his native town, who did not know any means of calculating what this tall, athletic, stirring gentleman would be at next, or what he would say in his whimsical humor. He was asked once (and only once) to read a lecture to the literary society of Langport. His subject was Reading, and he advised his amazed hearers, amongst other things, to read all of the Times newspaper every day, the advertisements included. They did not see the jest, and deemed the advice quite as incomprehensible as the man himself! He was as careless and as whimsical,

it would seem, as Lamb himself with regard to the impression he made on most sorts and conditions of men.

London, it turned out, and not Somersetshire, was to be Bagehot's chief place of residence. Somersetshire was always his home, but London was his place of work. As usual, the provinces were to enrich the capital. Though he first studied law for a little, Bagehot eventually turned to the practical business affairs which have for so many generations seemed the chief and most absorbing interest of all Englishmen. It was, of course, the intellectual side of business that really engaged him, however. He was something more than a Somersetshire banker. He became editor of the London Economist, and brought questions of finance to the light in editorials which clarified knowledge and steadied prediction in such fashion as made him the admiration of the Street. The City had never before seen its business set forth with such lucidity and mastery. London had taught Bagehot a great deal in the days when he was an undergraduate in University College, and he had roamed its streets, haunted by all the memories of deeds and of letters of which the place was so full. Now he learned by a new sort of companionship, – a companionship with the men who were the living forces of the time in business and in politics. It is not easy to overestimate the influence of a great capital upon affairs, or the influence of affairs upon a great capital. London, like Paris, is so much more than a political capital. No public man can remain long at

the heart of that vast, abounding life, or mix even for a little in that various society, where men of every sort of thought and power and experience and habit of reason throng and speak their minds, without in some way receiving a subtle and profound instruction in affairs. And the men of the city are themselves, in turn, instructed by their acquaintance at short range with the processes and the forces which control in the policy and business of the state. Such a capital as London is a huge intellectual clearing-house, and men get out of it, as it were, the net balances of the nation's needs and thoughts.

Bagehot both took and gave a great deal in such a place. His mind was singularly fitted to understand London, and every complex group of men and interests. He had the social imagination that Burke had, and Carlyle, – that every successful student of affairs must have, if he would scratch but a little beneath the surface or lift the mystery from any transaction whatever. For minds with this gift of sight there is a quick way opened to the heart of things. Their acquaintance with any individual man is but a detail in their acquaintance with men; and it is noteworthy that, though they gain in mastery, they do not gain in insight by their contact with men and with the actual business of the world. Burke saw as clearly and with as certain a penetration when he was in his twenties as when he had lived his life out. The years enriched his knowledge with details, and every added experience brought him some concrete matter to ground his

thought upon; but the mastery of these things was in him from the first.

Bagehot showed the same precocious power, and saw as clearly at twenty-five as at fifty, though he did not see as much or hold his judgment at so nice a balance. There is full evidence of this in the seven remarkable letters on the third Napoleon's Coup d'Etat, which he wrote from Paris while he was yet a law student. They are evidently the letters of a young man. Their style goes at a spanking, reckless gait that no older mind would have dared attempt or could have kept its breath at. Their satirical humor has a quick sting in it; their judgments are offhand and unconscionably confident; their crying heresies in matters of politics are calculated to shock English nerves very painfully. They are aggressive and a bit arrogant. But their extravagance is superficial. At heart they are sound, and even wise. The man's vision for affairs has come to him already. He sees that Frenchmen are not Englishmen, and are not to be judged, or very much aided either, by English standards in affairs. You shall not elsewhere learn so well what it was that happened in France in the early fifties, or why it happened, and could hardly have been staved off or avoided. "You have asked me to tell you what I think of French affairs," he writes. "I shall be pleased to do so; but I ought perhaps to begin by cautioning you against believing, or too much heeding, what I say." It is so he begins, with a shrewd suspicion, no doubt, that the warning is quite unnecessary. For he was writing to the editor

of The Inquirer, a journal but just established for the enlightenment of Unitarian dissenters, – a people Bagehot had reason to know, and could not hope to win either to the matter or to the manner of his thought. They were sure to think the one radically misleading and erroneous, and the other unpardonably flippant. But it was the better sport on that account to write for their amazement. He undertook nothing less bold than a justification of what Louis Napoleon had done in flat derogation and defiance of the constitutional liberties of France. He set himself to show an English audience, who he knew would decline to believe it, how desperate a crisis had been averted, how effectual the strong remedy had been, and how expedient at least a temporary dictatorship had become. "Whatever other deficiencies Louis Napoleon may have," he said, "he has one excellent advantage over other French statesmen: he has never been a professor, nor a journalist, nor a promising barrister, nor by taste a *littérateur*. He has not confused himself with history; be does not think in leading articles, in long speeches, or in agreeable essays." "He has very good heels to his boots, and the French just want treading down, and nothing else, – calm, cruel, businesslike oppression, to take the dogmatic conceit out of their heads. The spirit of generalization which, John Mill tells us, honorably distinguishes the French mind has come to this, that every Parisian wants his head *tapped* in order to get the formulas and nonsense out of it.... So I am for any carnivorous government." Conscious of his audacity

and of what will be said of such sentiments among the grave readers of The Inquirer, he hastens in his second letter to make his real position clear. "For the sake of the women who may be led astray," he laughs, affecting to quote St. Athanasius, "I will this very moment explain my sentiments."

He is sober enough when it comes to serious explanation of the difficult matter. Laughing satire and boyish gibe are put aside, and a thoughtful philosophy of politics – Burke's as well as his own – comes at once to the surface, in sentences admirably calm and wise. In justifying Napoleon, he says plainly and at the outset, he is speaking only of France and of the critical circumstances of the year 1852. "The first duty of society," he declares, "is the preservation of society. By the sound work of old-fashioned generations, by the singular painstaking of the slumberers in churchyards, by dull care, by stupid industry, a certain social fabric somehow exists; people contrive to go out to their work, and to find work to employ them actually until the evening; body and soul are kept together, – and this is what mankind have to show for their six thousand years of toil and trouble." You cannot better the living by political change, he maintains, unless you can contrive to hold change to a slow and sober pace, quiet, almost insensible, like that of the evolutions of husbanding growth. If you cannot do that, perhaps it is better to hold steadily to the old present ways of life, under a strong, unshaken, unquestioned government, capable of guidance and command. "Burke first taught

the world at large," he reminds us, "that politics are made of time and place; that institutions are shifting things, to be tried by and adjusted to the shifting conditions of a mutable world; that in fact politics are but a piece of business, to be determined in every case by the exact exigencies of that case, – in plain English, by sense and circumstances. This was a great step in political philosophy, though it *now* seems the events of 1848 have taught thinking persons (I fancy) further: they have enabled us to see that of all these circumstances so affecting political problems, by far and out of all question the most important is *national character*." "I need not prove to you that the French have a national character," he goes on, "nor need I try your patience with a likeness of it: I have only to examine whether it be a fit basis for national freedom. I fear you will laugh when I tell you what I conceive to be about the most essential mental quality for a free people whose liberty is to be progressive, permanent, and on a large scale: it is much *stupidity*. I see you are surprised; you are going to say to me, as Socrates did to Polus, 'My young friend, of course you are right; but will you explain what you mean? As yet you are not intelligible.'" The explanation is easily made, and with convincing force. He means that only a race of steady, patient, unimaginative habits of thought can abide steadfast in the conservative and businesslike conduct of government, and he sees the French to be what Tocqueville had called them, – a nation apt to conceive a great design, but unable to persist in its

pursuit, impatient after a single effort, "swayed by sensations, and not by principles," her "instincts better than her morality." "As people of 'large round-about common sense' will as a rule somehow get on in life," says Bagehot, "no matter what their circumstances or their fortune, so a nation which applies good judgment, forbearance, a rational and compromising habit, to the management of free institutions will certainly succeed; while the more eminently gifted national character will be but a source and germ of endless and disastrous failure, if, with whatever other eminent qualities, it be deficient in these plain, solid, and essential requisites." It is no doubt whimsical to call "large round-about common sense," good judgment, and rational forbearance "stupidity;" but he means, of course, that those who possess these solid practical gifts usually lack that quick, inventive originality and versatility in resource which we are apt to think characteristic of the creative mind. "The essence of the French character, he explains, is a certain mobility; that is, a certain 'excessive sensibility to present impressions,' which is sometimes 'levity,' for it issues in a postponement of seemingly fixed principles to a momentary temptation or a transient whim; sometimes 'impatience,' as leading to an exaggerated sense of existing evils; often 'excitement,' a total absorption in existing emotion; oftener 'inconsistency,' the sacrifice of old habits to present emergencies," – and these are qualities which, however engaging upon occasion, he is certainly right in regarding as a very serious, if not fatal, impediment

to success in self-government. "A real Frenchman," he exclaims, "can't be stupid: *esprit* is his essence; wit is to him as water, *bonsmots* as *bonsbons*." And yet "stupidity," as he prefers to call it, is, he rightly thinks, "nature's favorite resource for preserving steadiness of conduct and consistency of opinion: it enforces concentration; people who learn slowly learn only what they must."

This, which reads like the moral of an old man, is what Bagehot saw at twenty-six; and he was able, though a youth and in the midst of misleading Paris, to write quick sentences of political analysis which were fit to serve both as history and as prophecy. "If you have to deal with a mobile, a clever, a versatile, an intellectual, a dogmatic nation," he says, "inevitably and by necessary consequence you will have conflicting systems; every man speaking his own words, and giving his own suffrage to what seems good in his own eyes; many holding to-day what they will regret tomorrow; a crowd of crotchety notions and a heavy percentage of philosophical nonsense; a great opportunity for subtle stratagem and intriguing selfishness; a miserable division among the friends of tranquillity, and a great power thrown into the hands of those who, though often with the very best intentions, are practically and in matter of fact opposed both to society and civilization. And moreover, beside minor inconveniences and lesser hardships, you will indisputably have periodically – say three or four times in fifty years – a great crisis: the public mind much excited;

the people in the streets swaying to and fro with the breath of every breeze; the discontented *ouvriers* meeting in a hundred knots, discussing their real sufferings and their imagined grievances with lean features and angry gesticulations; the parliament all the while in permanence very ably and eloquently expounding the whole subject, one man proposing this scheme, and another that; the Opposition expecting to oust the ministers and ride in on the popular commotion, the ministers fearing to take the odium of severe or adequate repressive measures, lest they should lose their salary, their places, and their majority; finally a great crash, a disgusted people overwhelmed by revolutionary violence, or seeking a precarious, a pernicious, but after all a precious protection from the bayonets of military despotism." Could you wish a better analysis of the affairs of that clever, volatile people, and can you ascribe it wholly to his youth that Bagehot should in 1852 have deliberately concluded that "the first condition of good government" in France was "a really strong, a reputedly strong, a continually strong executive power"?

Henry Crabb Robinson, that amiable man of letters and staunch partisan of constitutional liberty, could never recall a name, especially in his old age, we are told; and in conversation with Mr. R. H. Hutton he used to refer to Bagehot by description as "that friend of yours, – you know whom I mean, you rascal! – who wrote those abominable, those disgraceful letters on the Coup d'Etat – I did not forgive him for years

after!" We must of course admit, with Mr. Hutton, that the letters were "airy, and even flippant, on a very grave subject;" but their airiness and flippancy were not of the substance: they were but a trick of youth, the playful exuberance of a lusty strength, – the colt was "feeling his oats." What the critic must note is that there is here already the vivid and effectual style that runs like a light through everything that Bagehot ever wrote. Mr. Hutton tells us that Bagehot "used to declare that his early style affected him 'like the joggling of a cart without springs over a very rough road;'" and no doubt the writing of his maturer years does often go at a more even and placid pace. But you shall not find in him anywhere the measured phrases of the formal, periodic writer, or any studied grace or cadence. The style has always, like the thought, a quick stroke, an intermittent sparkle, a jetlike play, as if it were a bit of sustained talk, and recorded, not so much a course of reasoning, as the successive, spontaneous impressions of a mind alert and quick of sight.

It is singular to find him preferring the dull English way of writing editorials to the sprightly, pointed paragraphs of the French journals, as he does in the extraordinary sixth letter on the Coup d'Etat, in which he hits off the characteristics of the French press with a point and truth I do not know where to match elsewhere. We are apt, upon a superficial impression, to think of Bagehot as himself touched with a certain French quality, and to think of his own writing as we

hear him exclaim of the French journalists, "How well these fellows write! ... How clear, how acute, how clever, how perspicuous!" But he tells us with what relief and satisfaction, after running for a little with these voluble and witty fellows, he opened the quiet columns of an English paper. "As long walking in picture galleries makes you appreciate a mere wall," he says, "so I felt that I understood for the first time that really dullness had its interest." "There was no toil, no sharp theory, no pointed expression, no fatiguing brilliancy." He quotes an English judge as having said, "I like to hear a Frenchman talk: he strikes a light, but what light he will strike it is impossible to predict; I think he doesn't know himself;" and he frankly confesses his own distaste for such irresponsible brightness. "Suppose, if you only can," he cries, "a House of Commons all Disraelis! It would be what M. Proudhon said of some French Assemblies, 'a box of matches.'" You cannot be with the man long without seeing that, for all he is so witty, and as quick as a Frenchman at making a point, there is really no Gallic blood in the matter. His processes of thought are as careful as his style is rapid and his wit reckless.

In 1852, the very year in which the letters on the Coup d'Etat were written, the period of Bagehot's preparation in the law was completed, and he was in due course called to the bar. But he decided not to enter upon the practice. He had read law with a zest for its systematic ways and its sharp and definite analytical processes, and with an unusual appreciation, no

doubt, of the light of businesslike interpretation which it applies to the various undertakings and relationships of society; but he dreaded the hot wigs, the unventilated courts, and the night drudgery which the active practitioner would have to endure, and betook himself instead to the less confining occupations of business. His father was interested in large commercial undertakings, and was a ship-owner as well as a banker, and his son found, in association with him, an active enough life, full of travel and of important errands here and there, upon which he could spend his energies with not a little satisfaction. We are not apt to think of commerce and banking as furnishing matter to satisfy such a mind as Bagehot's; but business is just as dull, and just as interesting, as you make it. Bagehot always maintained that "business is much more amusing than pleasure;" and of course it is, if you have mind enough to appreciate it upon all its sides and in all its bearings upon the life of society. Give a mind like Bagehot's such necessary stuff of life to work upon as is to be found in the commerce of a great nation, and it will at once invest it with the dignity and the charm of a great theme of speculation and study. Bagehot's contact with business made him a great economist, – an economist sure of his premises, and big-minded and scrupulously careful and guarded in respect of his conclusions. Mr. Hutton tells us that Bagehot "was always absent-minded about minutiae, and himself admitted that he never could 'add up.'" He was obliged to leave details to his assistants and subordinates. But

such has often been the singular failing of men who could nevertheless reason upon details in the mass with an unexampled certainty and power. Bagehot turned always, it would seem as if by instinct, to the larger aspects of every matter he was called upon to handle; and had, no doubt, that sort of imagination for enterprise which has been characteristic of great business men (as of great soldiers and statesmen) in all generations. Such men can put together colossal fortunes; but Bagehot's career did not lead him that way. The literary instinct was more deep-seated and radical in him than the money-making, and he found his right place as a man of business when he became editor of the London Economist. He did not long keep to Langport. His marriage, in 1858, brought him to the characteristic part of his career. His mother had urged him some time before to marry, but he had put her off with his customary banter. "A man's mother is his misfortune," he had said, "but his wife is his fault." Whether delay brought wisdom or not (when a man of genius gets a wife to his mind and need it is apt to be mere largess of Providence), certain it is that his marriage endowed him with happiness for the rest of his life, and introduced him to a new and more fruitful use of his gifts. He married the eldest daughter of the Right Honorable James Wilson, who had founded the Economist, and whose death, two years later, in India, in the service of the government, left Bagehot, at thirty-four, to conduct alone the great weekly which his genius was to lift to a yet higher place of influence.

Mr. Hutton believes that it was Bagehot's connection with the inner world of politics in London to which his marriage gave him entrance that enabled him to write his great works of political interpretation; for he was undoubtedly the first man to strip the English constitution of its "literary theory," and show it to the world as men of affairs knew it and used it. Mr. Hutton was Mr. Bagehot's lifelong intimate, and one hesitates to question his judgment in such a matter; but it may at least be said that it can in this case be established only by doubtful inference, even though uttered by a companion and friend. It is not necessary for such a mind as Bagehot's to have direct experience of affairs, or personal intercourse with the men who conduct them, in order to comprehend either the make-up of politics or the intimate forces of action. A hint is enough. Insight and inspiration do the rest. The gift of imaginative insight in respect of affairs carries always with it a subtle, unconscious power of construction which suffers not so much as the temptation to invent, and which is equally free from taint of abstract or fanciful inference. Somehow, – no man can say by what curious secret process or exquisite delicacy and certainty of intimation, – it reconstructs life after the irregular patterns affected by nature herself, and will build you the reality out of mere inference. Bagehot may have been quickened and assured by an intimate and first-hand knowledge of men and methods, but it seems like mistaking the character of his genius to say that he could not have done without this actual

sight of concrete cases and these personal instances of motive and action. The rest of his work justifies the belief that he could have seen without handling.

The power and the character of his imagination are proved by the extraordinary range it took. Most of the literary studies in which he has given us so memorable a taste of his quality as a critic and all-round man of letters were written before his marriage, between his twenty-sixth and his thirty-second years, – the most extraordinary of them all, perhaps, the essay on Shakespeare the Man, in 1853, when he was but twenty-seven; and there is everywhere to be found in those studies a man whose insight into life was easy, universal, and almost unerring; and yet the centre of life for him was quiet Langport in far Somersetshire. His fame as a political thinker was made later, when he was more mature, and his imagination had been trained to its functions by his wide travels in the high company of the men of genius of whom he had written. "Variety was his taste, and versatility his power," as he said of Brougham; and the variety of his taste and the versatility of his power showed in what he wrote of economy and of institutions no less than in what he wrote of individual men and books. In his English Constitution, which he published in 1867, he gave an account of the actual workings of parliamentary government, so lucid, so witty, so complete, and for all so concise and without delay about details (which seemed in its clear air to reveal themselves without comment), that it made itself instantly and once for

all a part of every man's thinking in that matter. Everybody saw what he intended them to see: that the English government is a government shaped and conducted by a committee of the House of Commons, *called* "her Majesty's ministers;" that the throne serves only to steady the administration of the government, to bold the veneration and imagination of the people; and that the House of Lords is only, at most, a revising and delaying chamber. The book is now a classic.

Two years later (1869) he turned to a broader field of thought in his Physics and Politics, in which he sought to apply the principles of heredity and natural selection to the development of society, showing how political organization was first hardened by custom; then altered and even revolutionized by changes of environment, and by the struggle for existence between banded groups of men; and finally given its nice adaptations to a growing civilization by the subtle, transmuting processes of an age of discussion. There are passages in this little volume which stimulate the thought more than whole treatises written by those who have no imagination whereby to revive the image of older ages of the world. Here, for example, is his striking comment upon the nations which, like the Chinese and the Persian, have stood still the long centuries through, caught and held fast, as he puts it, beneath a cake of antique custom: "No one will ever comprehend the arrested civilizations unless he sees the strict dilemma of early society. Either men had no law at all, and lived in confused tribes hardly hanging

together, or they had to obtain a fixed law by processes of incredible difficulty; those who surmounted that difficulty soon destroyed all those that lay in their way who did not, – and then they themselves were caught in their own yoke. The customary discipline, which could only be imposed on any early men by terrible sanctions, continued with those sanctions, and killed out of the whole society propensities to variation which are the principle of progress. Experience shows how incredibly difficult it is to get men really to encourage the principle of originality." There is here the same thesis his letters on the Coup d'Etat had advanced, with a sort of boyish audacity, several years before. This is the philosophy of *dullness*. No nation, while it is forming, hardening its sinews, acquiring its habits of order, can afford to encourage originality. It must insist upon a rigid discipline and subordination. And even after it has formed its habits of order, it cannot afford to have too much originality, or to relax its fibre by too rapid change, – cannot afford to be as volatile as the French. Progress is devoutly to be wished, and discussion is its instrument, – the opening of the mind; those nations are the great nations of the modern world which have dominated the European stage, where there is movement, and the plot advances from ordered change to change. But conservatism and order must even yet be preferred to change, and the nations which do not think too fast are the nations which advance most rapidly. Bagehot speaks somewhere of "the settled calm by which the world is best administered."

Bagehot's thought is not often constructive. Its business is generally analysis, interpretation. But in Physics and Politics it is distinctly creative and architectonic. It is always his habit to go at once to the concrete reality of a subject, lingering scarcely a moment upon its conventionalities: he sees always with his own eyes, – never with another's; and even analysis takes from him a certain creative touch. The object of his thought is so vividly displayed that you seem to see all of it, instead of only some of it. But here, in speaking of ages past and gone, his object is reconstruction, and that direct touch of his imagination makes what he says seem like the report of an eye-witness. You know, after reading this book, what an investigator the trained understanding is, – a sort of original authority in itself. Nor is his humor gone or exiled from these solemn regions of thought. There is an intermittent touch of it even in what he says of the political force of religion. "Those kinds of morals and that kind of religion which tend to make the firmest and most effectual character," he explains, "are sure to prevail" in every struggle for existence between organized groups or nations of men, "all else being the same; the creeds or systems that conduce to a soft, limp mind tend to perish, except some hard extrinsic force keep them alive. Thus Epicureanism never prospered at Rome, but Stoicism did; the stiff, serious character of the great prevailing nation was attracted by what seemed a confirming creed, and deterred by what looked like a relaxing creed. The inspiriting doctrines fell upon the

ardent character, and so confirmed its energy. Strong beliefs win strong men, and then make them stronger. Such is no doubt one cause why Monotheism tends to prevail over Polytheism; it produces a higher, steadier character, calmed and concentrated by a great single object; it is not confused by competing rites, or distracted by miscellaneous deities." "Mr. Carlyle has taught the present generation many lessons, and one of these is that 'God-fearing' armies are the best armies. Before his time people laughed at Cromwell's saying, 'Trust God, and keep your powder dry.' But we now know that the trust was of as much use as the powder, if not of more. That high concentration of steady feeling makes men dare everything and do anything." Is it a misuse of the word to say that a quiet, serious sort of humor lurks amidst these sentences, and once and again peeps out at you with solemn eyes? And there are bold, unconventional sallies of wit in the man as there were in the boy. Take, for example, what he said of one of the qualities which seemed to him very noticeable in that extraordinary and very uncomfortable man, Lord Brougham. "There is a last quality which is difficult to describe in the language of books, but which Lord Brougham excels in, and which has perhaps been of more value to him than all his other qualities put together. In the speech of ordinary men it is called 'devil;' persons instructed in the German language call it 'the Demonic element.' ... It is most easily explained by physiognomy. There is a glare in some men's eyes which seems to say, 'Beware!

I am dangerous; *noli me tangere*.' Lord Brougham's face had this. A mischievous excitability is the most obvious expression of it. If he were a horse, nobody would buy him; with that eye no one could answer for his temper."

With what apparent irreverence, too, he opens his chapter on the Monarchy, in his English Constitution! "The use of the Queen in a dignified capacity," he begins, "is incalculable. . . . Most people, when they read that the Queen walked on the slopes at Windsor, that the Prince of Wales went to the Derby, have imagined that too much thought and prominence were given to little things. But they have been in error; and it is nice to trace how the actions of a retired widow and an unemployed youth become of such importance." And yet he is not laughing. "The best reason why monarchy is a strong government," he goes on, very seriously, "is that it is an intelligible government. The mass of mankind understand it, and they hardly anywhere in the world understand any other." His thought turns back to the Coup d'Etat which he had seen in France. "The issue was put to the French people," he says; "they were asked, 'Will you be governed by Louis Napoleon, or will you be governed by an assembly?' The French people said, 'We will be governed by the one man we can imagine, and not by the many people we cannot imagine.' " The man is a conservative; it is only his wit that is a radical.

His Lombard Street is the most outwardly serious of his greater writings. It is his picture of the money

market, whose public operations and hidden influences he exhibits with his accustomed, apparently inevitable lucidity. He explains, as perhaps only he could explain, the parts played in the market by the Chancellors of the Exchequer, whose counselor he often was, by the Bank of England, and by the joint-stock banks, such as his own in Somersetshire; the influences, open and covert, that make for crisis or for stability, – the whole machinery and the whole psychology of the subtle game and business of finance. There is everywhere the same close intimacy between the fact and the thought. What he writes seems always a light playing through affairs, illuminating their substance, revealing their fibre. "As an instrument for arriving at truth," one of Bagehot's intimate friends once said, "I never knew anything like a talk with Bagehot." It got at once to the heart of a subject. He instantly appreciated the whole force and significance "of everything you yourself said; making talk with him, as Roscoe once remarked, 'like riding a horse with a perfect mouth.' But most unique of all was his power of keeping up animation without combat. I never knew a power of discussion, of coöperative investigation of truth, to approach to it. It was all stimulus, and yet no contest." The spontaneity with which he wrote put the same quality into his writings. They have all the freshness, the vivacity, the penetration of eager talk, and abound in those flashes of insight and discovery which make the speech of some gifted men seem like a series of inspirations. He does not always complete his subjects,

either, in writing, and their partial incompleteness makes them read the more as if they were a body of pointed remarks, and not a set treatise or essay.

No doubt the best samples of his style are to be found in his literary and biographical essays, where his adept words serve him so discerningly in the disclosure of some very subtle things: the elements of individual genius, the motives and constituents of intellectual power, the diverse forces of differing men. But you shall find the same qualities and felicities in his way of dealing with the grosser and more obvious matters of politics. Here, as everywhere, to quote his own language about Laurence Sterne, his style "bears the indefinable traces which an exact study of words will always leave upon the use of words." Here, too, there is the same illuminative play of sure insight and broad sagacity. You may illustrate his method by taking passages almost at random. "The brief description of the characteristic merit of the English constitution is," he says, "that its dignified parts are very complicated and somewhat imposing, very old and rather venerable; while its efficient part, at least when in great and critical action, is decidedly simple and rather modern. We have made, or rather stumbled on, a constitution which – though full of every species of incidental defect, though of the worst *workmanship* in all out-of-the-way matters of any constitution in the world – yet has two capital merits: it has a simple efficient part which, on occasion, and when wanted, *can* work more simply and easily and better than any instrument of govern-

ment that has yet been tried; and it contains likewise historical, complex, august, theatrical parts, which it has inherited from a long past – which *take* the multitude – which guide by an insensible but an omnipotent influence the associations of its subjects. Its essence is strong with the strength of modern simplicity; its exterior is august with the Gothic grandeur of a more imposing age." He is interested to bring out the contrast between English political arrangements and our own. "When the American nation has chosen its President," he explains, "its virtue goes out of it, and out of the Transmissive College through which it chooses. But because the House of Commons has the power of dismissal in addition to the power of election, its relation to the Premier is incessant. They guide him, and he leads them. He is to them what they are to the nation. He only goes where he believes they will go after him. But he has to take the lead; he must choose his direction, and begin the journey. Nor must he flinch. A good horse likes to feel the rider's bit; and a great deliberative assembly likes to feel that it is under worthy guidance. . . . The great leaders of Parliament have varied much, but they have all had a certain firmness. A great assembly is as soon spoiled by over-indulgence as a little child. The whole life of English politics is the action and reaction between the Ministry and the Parliament. The appointees strive to guide, and the appointors surge under the guidance." "The English constitution, in a word, is framed on the principle of choosing a single sovereign authority, and

making it good; the American, upon the principle of having many sovereign authorities, and hoping that their multitude may atone for their inferiority. The Americans now extol their institutions, and so defraud themselves of their due praise. But if they had not a genius for politics; if they had not a moderation in action singularly curious where superficial speech is so violent; if they had not a regard for law, such as no great people have yet evinced, and infinitely surpassing ours, the multiplicity of authorities in the American constitution would long ago have brought it to a bad end. Sensible shareholders, I have heard a shrewd attorney say, can work *any* deed of settlement; and so the men of Massachusetts could, I believe, work *any* constitution. But political philosophy must analyze political history; it must distinguish what is due to the excellence of the people, and what to the excellence of the laws; it must carefully calculate the exact effect of each part of the constitution, though thus it may destroy many an idol of the multitude, and detect the secret of utility where but few imagined it to lie."

These are eminently businesslike sentences. They are not consciously concerned with style; they do not seem to stop for the turning of a phrase; their only purpose seems to be plain elucidation, such as will bring the matter within the comprehension of everybody. And yet there is a stirring quality in them which operates upon the mind like wit. They are tonic and full of stimulus. No man could have spoken them without a lively eye. I suppose their "secret of utility" to

be a very interesting one indeed, – and nothing less than the secret of all Bagehot's power. Young writers should seek it out and ponder it studiously. It is this: he is never writing in the air. He is always looking point-blank and with steady eyes upon a definite object; he takes pains to see it, alive and natural, as it really is; he uses a phrase, as the masters of painting use a color, not because it is beautiful, – he is not thinking of that, – but because it matches life, and is the veritable image of the thing of which he speaks. Moreover, he is not writing merely to succeed at that: he is writing, not to describe, but to make alive. And so the secret comes to light. Style is an instrument, and is made imperishable only by embodiment in some great use. It is not of itself stuff to last; neither can it have real beauty except when working the substantial effects of thought or vision. Its highest triumph is to hit the meaning; and the pleasure you get from it is not unlike that which you get from the perfect action of skill. The *object* is so well and so easily attained! A man's vocabulary and outfit of phrase should be his thought's perfect habit and manner of pose. Bagehot *saw* the world of his day, saw the world of days antique, and showed us what he saw in phrases which interpret like the tones of a perfect voice, in words which serve us like eyes.