

## THE VALUE OF DIALECT.

ALL art is fidelity to pure and idealized Nature. The true artist is her interpreter and confidante. She admits him alone to her studio and reveals there her most perfect creations. Thus he who aspires to write must, as it were, be in the secret with Nature; otherwise she repudiates his work. The divine fire of expression can be kindled only by a spark from her own altar. But her phases of beauty and grandeur, humor and tenderness, are myriad fold and ever changing, so that he who would preserve them must catch them flitting by exactly as he perceives them. It is the individual, not the mass, that attracts our closest attention and claims our sympathetic interest. We cannot, however, differentiate this individual from his manner of thought, nor the thought from the medium of expression. Thus, by Nature's own law, the use of dialect is often a necessity.

Story-writing is an attempt to preserve the life of a certain time and locality with all the concomitants of local coloring. The personal experience of the writer becomes thus all-important, as it should; he can testify with authority only of what he knows. On this principle Miss Murfree could not have delineated the old New England life, nor could Miss Wilkins have pictured for us the Tennessee mountaineers.

I seriously doubt if certain types of character can be adequately depicted with dialect. Mental traits are often inseparably wedded to the linguistic medium. Take for illustration this description of the "rebel yell" by the old negro in Page's *Meh Lady*: "You'd a thought de wull wuz splittin' open, an' sometimes ef you'd listen right good you could heah 'em yellin', like folks in de harves'-fiel' hollerin' after a ole hyah." If we attempt to paraphrase this into good English, much of the peculiar sentiment is lost in the process. The subtle aroma, which is its charm, evaporates.

In a recent letter to the writer Mr. Page makes this remark: "It has been very often suggested that I was writing up the darkie; but my real intention has always been to write up the South and its social life, using the darkie as the medium to tell the story, because he was a constituent part of that life." Some critics hold that it is more difficult to write a perfect dialect story than one in classic English. The art is higher, they say, being more complex. The vigorous, native vernacular has a delightful flavor, for it is in perfect harmony with the people's life. The language of the average unconventional man is quite satisfactory, especially in a book. As soon as he is made "to talk proper" he is spoiled. I think that we would hardly have formed the acquaintance of the old Virginia "uncle" or the Western "hoosier," or the pretty Creoles if they had been made to talk to us in Hawthornesque English!

Ours is such a heterogeneous country, to be true to the life of all sections, our romancers must use a score or two of dialects. Dialects are but the pigments which are used in producing lifelike pictures of the people. All stories are only so many separate sketches of the many-sided social structure of American life. A great national novel in this country is almost an impossibility. Such a work must portray with skilful hand and sympathetic touch the many types of American character; and these must not be labeled, but it should be possible to tell from what section each comes, by his dialect. On this account it seems likely that the fiction of the future will continue to take the form of the short story or character sketch.

ARMSTRONG WAUCHOPE,