

The Wasp
January 23, 1886

Prattle

An old hen named Kate Sanborn has laid a literary egg entitled, *The Vanity and Insanity of Genius*, and all the cockerel “critics” of the country are cackling in its praise. I have not read the thing—God forbid!—but a critical capon all over bejoyed of the performance says, in a local newspaper, that he has “gathered a mass of anecdotes in regard to famous men of all ages, to bear out her theory that there is a very narrow line between genius and insanity”—which gives me all the knowledge of the matter that I want. *Her* theory indeed! as if it had not been the conviction of every lignicephalus dullard from the days of Job—a conviction so rooted in their bones, so nourished by their envy and bearing such fruit of comfort to their peasant souls that it has served them in place of a religion. When was it not true that he by blockheads was accounted mad who spoke after a fashion that themselves could not understand, challenged the reports of their eyeless observation or disputed the things they thought their thoughts, parroted from one another through centuries of unexamining acceptance?

These paunchpates digestionless have for generations been quoting in their support the assurance of a famous poet that “great wits to madness nearly are allied”—or as we should say today, “great abilities” or “talents.” Did he mean what they think? Naturally no, for he had himself greater wits than any man living. He was affirming the thinness of the division between reason and unreason, and he put it as strongly as he could, as if he had said—as doubtless he would have said had his meter permitted: “*Even* great wits to madness nearly are allied.” How much closer, then, the kinship of little wits. Suppose I write:

Man’s works are leveled to the plain at last,
Strong towers, crumbling, fall before the blast—

Must Sir Blockhead take me to mean that strong towers are alone unstable, and feeble ones exempt from decay? May I be buried face downward if I am not fatigued of all fools!

Mad, quoth’a! The only man who is not altogether mad is he who is not altogether destitute of genius. What *is* genius? A thousand definitions have been made. I shall attempt none, yet I think I can help all but the blockheads to an understanding of the matter. In the first place, I believe it to be in some degree a very common faculty. There are few, I fancy, but have been at times conscious of having solved a problem, struck out a bright thought or hit upon a felicitous expression, by some lighting process altogether unlike those customary methods whose deliberate action enables us to trace and record their steps—a process which takes the mind to its mark with as straight and incomprehensible a certainty as the flight of a homing pigeon. In most of us this is a rare phenomenon; in many it never occurs. Many experience but do not mark. But the man to whom this straight and sure process is habitual; in whom it is the natural and customary mental mode; who gets to his conclusions without the

help of premises; who, like a master of the rifle, hits his mark without sighting; who is right automatically, he knows not how—him we call, distinctively, a genius, particularly if his gift display itself in those things which arrest attention and address our sympathies, as art, literature and war.

There are those who deny that there is such a thing a genius, as there are men born blind who, under the same circumstances, would deny that there is such a thing as color. There is genius; it is not a debatable question, for though he who affirms may know, he who denies cannot be shown. It is no “faculty divine” but a perfectly natural intellectual method or process, though not subject to analysis. By means of it, its possessor may know things without having learned them. It may not be true that Homer instructed the brickmakers how to make bricks, nor the cobbler how to mend sandals. Possibly Lord Brougham did not teach the brewers a trick worth knowing in making beer, but the currency of such anecdotes in all ages attest a truth that is obvious and all literature is full of its illustrations. How did Dickens know the horrors of solitary confinement—not that it is horrible; that we all know; but exactly in what way, succession and order certain dreadful feelings assail the sufferer. His description of this kind of torture had been verified by hundreds who have endured it. Yet it is known that he did not derive it from the poor wretch by whose fate it was suggested, nor from anything but his “inner consciousness.” How came it that Hugo, a civilian who had never seen a battle, related the story of Waterloo as never battle-story was related before. No soldier can read it with an even pulse; the spirit of battle is in every line; and that is not true of any other prose description of any other battle. Where are the countless other annalists of the gigantic struggle? What has become of their work? Consumed utterly in the conflagration of Hugo’s genius. And at this day, in this distant land, there is exhibited to enthusiastic hundreds of thousands a panorama of the fight at Waterloo, where you will see nothing but was painted from Hugo’s imagination and hear nothing but the words in which he set down his vision. I confess the pronunciation of most of the proper names is not Hugo’s.

I am persuaded that in genius only is perfect mental health. In sickness we are conscious of our condition; the well man thinks not how well he is—counts not his pulse-beats, notes not the action of his lungs, nor by dyspepsia is forced to think of digestion. All his organs perform their offices un-thought on. But for sickness, there had been no physiology; but for mental disability, no logic. The mind conscious of its own methods is making a record of symptoms. “I have a liver,” says the poor devil yellowing all over with jaundice. “Man has a mind,” says the philosopher; and so keen is the preacher’s consciousness of this pestering possession that he considers it the sole verity of his existence and expects to endure it forever—as a dyspeptic might affirm the immortality of the stomach, whereas the man of sane digestion would not know he had a stomach unless told. When you can trace the workings of your mind it is because it is working badly. The supple joints of the healthy reason do not squeak. The carrier pigeon which takes note of mountain headland and river is lost.

“Well, genius is vain and conceited, anyhow,” saith Blocktop. May I never live to be a doddering and imbecile old man if this be not stupidity divine! It was vanity, was it, Gutbrains, when Shakespeare began one of his immortal sonnets:

Not marble, not the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.

It would have been vanity in a blockhead; it would conceitedly have introduced a feeble and ephemeral rhyme. It was conceit, was it, Smirkface—the superb unconcern with which Heine answered one of your kind who had assailed him in a newspaper: “I am to be tried in the assizes of literature. I know who I am.” It would have been conceit in *you*, Slushwump.

A man brags of his ancestors without offense and bedaubes all his belongings, to the very collar of his dog, with the visible assertion of his illustrious descent. Your host at dinner is warm in praise of his own wine, and you think it a mighty pretty weakness. I’ll be roasted whole if I know why a man having genius should not speak of it! Out with it, Brother Pixley, out with it. *End of the discourse on Genius.*

By careless omission of the words “at Bull Run,” last week, my statement that Generals Beauregard and Johnston both “claimed the chief command” was a trifle indefinite, but I trust the *Wasp* has not a reader who did not supply the missing words from his own knowledge and reading. To be ignorant of anything about the civil war—not to know accurately how any considerable event occurred, both ways—would be ignorance indeed in these days when every old soldier is in his anecdotage. This business of being an old soldier is overdone: its growth threatens to swallow up every other industry in the country. That is not the worst of it. It will not do to say that the old soldiers fought better than they talk, for most of them talk pretty well, and many didn’t fight; but it is certain that the fighting did a deal more good than the talking. These battle yarns, indeed, are nursing a baby war, which now lies mouthing its fact knuckles and marking time with its pinky feet, in a cradle of young imaginations, but in another decade it will be striding through the land in seven-league boots, chewing soap. Every generation must have its war; that is a law of nature; but if the youngers who are now tucking out their mental skins with the gingery comestible supplied by old soldiers do not kick up a shindy compared with which the late war was a season of religious tranquility you may have my share of the national debt.

O Young Men’s Christian Association,
I’d really like to be told—
If the question meets your approbation—
At what age a young man grows old.

For twenty years I have watched your members—
Well stricken in years at first—
Bending beneath successive Decembers,
Like Struldbrugs old and accurst.

Ponce de Leon in Florida’s wildwood
Searched for the Fountain of Youth;
Do you think that you in second childhood
Have found it, in very truth?

And tell me, pray, another thing, never
Clearly by me understood:
To wit—at what time of life, if ever,
Young Christians begin to be good.

We shall at last have a newspaper in San Francisco that is worth reading: a local contemporary has promised us something from the pen of a lady who, the editor assures us, is “a star that pulsates in the heaven of the soul, now exploring the abysmal depths, now soaring in the empyrean of space, urged by the restless fires of feeling and impulse.” That’s all very well, neighbour; she may pulsate undisturbed in the heaven of your soul, and explore your abysmal depths—which, I take it, is to do pretty much the same thing; but let me catch sight of her soaring in the empyrean of this paper and I’ll fill her so full of shot that she’ll never dare to swim a creek. If I don’t I’m a goat.

My good friends, please don’t say, any more, that Clerk McCarthy “got up and dusted.” If you will use slang, use it with some relevancy to the facts. Our embezzlers all go across the water to Honolulu now. Mr. McCarthy got up and spattered.

It seems to be the prevailing opinion that if Germany holds on to the Samoan Islands an acorn should be planted at once to produce the keel of a first-class man-of-war.

(Source: Archive.org, <https://archive.org/stream/waspjanjune188616unse#page/n32/mode/1up>)