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The Place of the Novel.

Culture indefatigably tries, not to make what each raw person may like, the rule by which he fashions himself, but to draw ever nearer to a sense of what is indeed useful, beautiful, and becoming, and to get the raw person to like that. - MATTHEW ARNOLD.

In the library of a wise man the department of prose fiction need not be more than sparingly represented. Life is short; and in novels one must read much to learn little. Modern novelists have mostly forgotten - if they ever knew - the original purpose of the novel. As conceived by Samuel Richardson, the father of the countless tribe, the novel was to convey information and 'moral reflections' through the medium of a story, the plot to stand in the same relation to the solid, informative part of the work as the string in a necklace does to the beads. Though lacking in the technique, the superior diction, and the more subtle character-analysis of the best modern prose fiction, the early novels - say from those of Fielding and Smollett on to those of Scott and Jane Austen - had a certain social and psychological value from the fact that the types of character brought together in them were always broad and distinct, illustrating the thought, speech, and manners of a class.

But now the genuinely popular novels tend to be all string and no beads. The novelists most in favour are writers who are neither formative nor informative, who rarely generalise, who have no discernible social or psychological purpose in view, whose characters are not types, but simply people to whom things happen. A novelist is esteemed by the average reader, not for how much he can teach through the medium of his art, but for the directness of his narrative and its exclusion of everything except the dialogue, incidents, and 'situations' strictly needed to help on the plot. The short story is, in this view, the ideal story; Hugh Conway is the ideal story-teller; not Kipling, or Jacobs, or Joseph Conrad. Meredith, Hardy, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and H. G. Wells are of the class of teaching novelists; but the fact that they are not as popular as 'Ethel Dell' and Mr. Charles Garvice shows that their writing is not the sort of thing the public wants is accustomed to get.

The Fault of the Novel.

The fault of the novel is that it is so largely concerned with 'machinery.' In literature one wants life experiences clarified and concentrated. To read of railway journeys and sea

voyages, to eat other people's dinners over again in black-and-white, to wade through pages upon pages of non-didactic dialogue or descriptions of faces and postures - all this is too tiresome even if it were not so unprofitable. Novels are good enough for people who can't assimilate an idea unless it is presented in a pictorial or dramatic setting, or for those who don't want ideas at all, but read merely to kill the time in a life which they don't know how to use. To those who read to learn, Green's 'History' is more entertaining than the best modern novel; and as regards the great majority of novels of all sorts, it is only sober fact to say of them that truth is especially stranger than that sort of fiction.

In a lively 'Gossip on Romance,' Louis Stevenson argues that there is a deep craving for incident; and he appears to assume that this craving is legitimate and commendable simply because it is there.

Eloquence and thought, character and conversation (he says) were but obstacles to brush aside as we dug blithely after a certain sort of incident like a pig for truffles. . . . Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder; certain old houses demand to be haunted; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck.

The existence of this desire for incident is undeniable; but there is good reason to believe that it has been largely fomented, if not in some minds altogether begotten, by the writers of fiction themselves. The craving for incident appears at its natural worst in the case of the boy who robs his employer, runs away from home, and is presently found by the police with a loaded revolver and a collection of blood-curdling tales in his possession. The passion for incident might be as general as the belief in ghosts and witchcraft has been; but that we should encourage it, and that a whole class of men and women should make it the serious business of their lives to cater for it, seems more than doubtful.

This craving for incident was, as we should expect to find, abnormally strong in Stevenson, and, since it gave us 'The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,' we may be glad and thankful for it. But although it can be turned to good account in the hands of a novelist, it is not therefore necessarily healthy and desirable in men and women generally. The general cultivation of the spirit of adventure would have - indeed, already has - a strong tendency to turn men and women from the plain and noble utilities of life, inclining them to follow romantic pursuits, and to look for sudden strokes of fortune providing that which they might more certainly get by honest work.

'Things as they are.'

I do not wish to be ranked among the Philistines. I trust that the army of the light may always be well recruited; for if that army does not keep the world sweet, it does much to prevent it turning sour. But the world must always in the main consist of people who have more or less prosaic work to do; and their need is not so much to be fed upon romantic incident as, in the words of Bishop Butler, to see 'things as they are.' By the prevalent wholesale devouring of novels their opportunities are enormously abridged of learning the history, position, and prospects of the country and the world in which they live and of knowing what life is in itself.

If incident and romance must be had, are there not plenty of the elements of romance, without its illusions, in the narrative of 'things as they are' and have been? Are the friends of the novel prepared to contend that truth is, after all, *not* stranger than fiction? In order to justify the pre-eminence sought to be given to the novel of incident, it would be necessary to justify the love of incident. But that is not all. It would also be necessary to show that, in the novel, the incident is more abundant as well as more engrossing than it is in history and biography.

Now, the experience of well-read persons is that they remember the occurrences in fiction much less readily than the events of history. The really vivid 'situations' and the realisable flesh-and-blood characters in fiction are, after all, few in number. Micawber, Mark Tapley, Pecksniff, Baillie Nicol Jarvie, old Trapbois, Mrs. Poyser, Becky Sharpe, Allan Breck - these and a very few more would exhaust the list; and these are widely remembered and their sayings often quoted chiefly because Dickens and Scott, George Eliot and Thackeray have ten readers where Plutarch and Gibbon and Macaulay have but one.

What we Remember.

But I repeat that, to those who read history as well as fiction, the pictures of the historian live more vividly on the mental retina than those of the novelist, be the latter ever so skilful. Leonidas and his Spartans in the Pass of Thermopylæ; Scaevola before Lars Porsena; Regulus before the Roman Senate; the exclamation of Caesar at finding Brutus among the assassins; the midnight alarm given by the geese of the Capitol, which betrayed the advance of the barbarians, and for the time saved the power of Rome; Canute on the sea beach: the adventures of Alfred, Wallace, and Bruce - those form the incidents we remember rather than the tame tableaux of the novelist. Is there anything in fiction more horrible, if horrors are wanted, than the murder of Edward II.; more breathlessly enthralling than the taking of Edinburgh Castle by Lord Randolph, more romantically daring than the attack on the Armada by the cockboats of Howard and Drake, of Hawkins and Frobisher? What scenes of martyrdom are there in fiction that thrill us in the reading like the death scenes of Ridley and Cranmer, or those of Servetus, of Bruno, or of George Wishart? Where shall we see beauty in distress as we see it in Queen Mary's chamber at the slaying of Rizzio? Where shall we see aught stranger than the spectacle of physical ugliness and moral turpitude prevailing for a time over all disadvantages and all obstacles as in the story of the Third Richard? What hero of fiction could be made to vie in gifts and graces and accomplishments with the veritable personage known as the Admirable Crichton? The Marquis of Montrose, Napoleon, Garibaldi, Mazzini had each of them a career far more romantic, significant, and lofty than those of the Esmonds or Mortons, the Ivanhoes or Devereuxs of the novel at its best. If a mighty canvas, great figures, and stirring incidents are required, what in fiction can compare with the very soberest history of the French Revolution?

The Strangeness of Truth.

The novelist cannot safely afford to outrage probability. He must draw upon the incidents and experiences of real life. But history and biography show probability outraged every

day in real life. It is in real life that precedents are established and 'records' beaten. Steam, gas-lighting, balloons, electricity, were all part of the machinery of life before they became properties to the novelist; and although Jules Verne anticipates science in tales like 'Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea' and 'From the Earth to the Moon,' he stands almost alone in that department, while even he has in every case got his first hint from science. (This was written before the advent of H. G. Wells as the pseudo-scientist in fiction. In this department Wells is surely the last word in ingenuity; but my contention still holds good; for Wells stands pretty much alone as the successor of Verne.)

Would it be utterly banal to say that, as a conceiver and bringer-forth of things strange and new, Verne must take a subordinate place to the inventor of the phonograph?

As it is in science and the arts, so it is in the problems of the mind. In all the elements of the fearful and wonderful, the new and the true, the useful and the absorbingly interesting, history, biography, and the daily papers are grander and more fertile than fiction. I know a man who falls asleep over 'Oliver Twist,' but reads *The Times* money columns with zest at midnight!

The lives of men in general are humdrum enough, not because there is not scope for legitimate adventure and wholesome variety, but because men live and move in the ruts of custom, preferring to do over again what they have often done before. If they are to find in literature the variety and excitement which they do not find in life itself, the antidote to monotony is to be looked for, not so much in fiction as in history and biography, in 'the fairy tales of science' and the creations of 'the poet's teeming head.'

Incident without Illusion.

It may be said that to prove all this is to prove too much. To condemn the novel because it consists largely of incident, and then to extol history because it abounds in incident of a more engrossing kind than that of the novel, may look like inconsistency. But apart from the interest attaching to historical incidents, enacted on the great scale, and didactic with all the force of truth and reality, and apart, also, from the value of the historian's disquisitions on the characters of notable men and important institutions, history, considered merely as a narrative of events, has one enormous advantage over fiction. In history we get incident without illusion. In novels the incidents are modified, are made subordinate and contributory to the climax of the plot. They are illusory because worked up with a given end in view. The climax of a novel is usually of the nature of either tragedy or comedy; and the characters in the novel pass through only the one tragedy or the one comedy. But in history as in real life men and nations pass through comedies and tragedies in chequered succession; and the greater value of history is that it shows us men and nations failing or succeeding in the long run very much according to their deserts - failing when they attempt the impossible or the undesirable, failing when they do not choose the proper means to a given end, or do not properly use the means they have adopted - failing from such causes, succeeding from causes the reverse of these.

One of the well-known illusions fostered by fiction is the idea that vice finds speedy punishment and virtue speedy reward. But there are sins, both secret and open, whose

consequences fall even more heavily upon the son and the son's son than upon the sinner himself. Novels are already sufficiently long – the bad ones much too long. But for certain purposes they are, and must be, too short. There are great life principles - good and bad, social and personal - which require more than a lifetime, more than the life of a generation, for their proper working out. (Zola's 'Rougon-Macquart' series, being the *Histoire Naturelle et Sociale d'une Famille sous le Second Empire,* narrated in twenty volumes, forms a tacit recognition of the truth of this.)

They require to be in operation, it may be, for centuries before their results can be adequately known and appraised. Think how long the intolerable burdens of the *ancien régime* were tolerated in France! For the due development of such principles the scale and scope of the novel are necessarily too limited. But it is not so with history. There the scale embraces centuries of time and the scope millions of persons. For while the novel deals only with a portion of the life of imaginary persons, history deals with the continuous life of real nations. The novel, again, represents men and women steering, intuitively rather than intelligently, by the pole star of truth and righteousness, yet defeated for a time by the machinations of successful villainy. Then one day villainy is unmasked and punished, virtue is rewarded, couples are paired off for marriage, and the customary impression of post-nuptial bliss is conveyed either expressly or by implication. This does not apply to the realistic school, whose exponents are chiefly remarkable for microscopical minuteness in description, inconsequential dialogue, the unexpected killing-off of the chief characters, the gradual, unnoticed, dropping-out of the minor ones, with a trick of now breaking off the narrative suddenly, or again drawing it out to a long-deferred, lame, and impotent conclusion. One of the chief aims of the realistic novel is to be as unlike the ordinary novel as possible. It perhaps comes nearer the truth than does the ordinary novel; but is it art? And can any one pretend that up to this point realism, in the almost exclusive attention which it has devoted to the ugly, the diseased, and the wicked, has not been grossly lop-sided?

History, to resume the comparison, gives no countenance to the illusion, fostered by fiction, that our troubles end with marriage. It has comparatively little to say about strokes of luck and the chapter of accidents. Its tendency is to show that 'Providence' fights on the side of the strongest battalions, whatever the nature of the warfare may be. The historian, also, has more than primary colours upon his literary palette: he does not divide his personages into good and bad, silly and crafty, heroes and villains. He shows us vice and virtue, wisdom and folly largely intermingled in the same natures. He shows us a man like Lord Bacon, sycophantic, mean, greedy; yet sagacious, learned, full of intellectual curiosity and zeal for science to the day of his death. He shows us ecclesiastics, such as Calvin and Knox, narrow and bigoted on matters of doctrine and church government, yet on questions of popular and secular education open-minded and progressive. He shows us men prepared, like Guy Fawkes, to commit a great crime from an excess of disinterested zeal. Portraying the characters of men who have been by turns grasping and generous, cruel and humane, vindictive and magnanimous, history guards us against summary judgments and sweeping general propositions. Obliged to give us at least an approximation to the truth, history avoids alike the juvenile optimism of the old-fashioned novel and the pessimistic 'realism' of the modern. Instead of fostering illusions

it dispels them, while at the same time it gives us hopes based on the certainty of past progress,

Province of the Novel.

Of course the novel has its province. At the best - and a splendid best that is - fiction is psychology, ethics, common sense, and the conduct of life teaching by examples. At the worst - and the worst is greatly in excess - it consists of tediously perverse heroics, fatuous 'yearning,' or tedious, meaningless gossip – 'the clink of teaspoons and the accents of the curate.' If it be argued that the reader should study what he most affects, on the ground that 'no profit comes where is no pleasure ta'en,' the answer is that one of the chief functions of criticism is to appraise the relative value of the various forms of literature, and thereby show the reader what he ought to affect. If this has to be done with regard to prose fiction, that branch of letters must be placed quite last on the list.

The view of the novel here expressed is no merely puritanical negation; neither is it to be dismissed as the carping criticism of a misanthropical Dryasdust. It is a view which, in less or more definite form, has been held and expressed by the novelists themselves. As all the world knows, Scott turned to prose fiction only when he found himself eclipsed at poetry by Byron. Charles Reade coveted success as a dramatist rather than as a novelist. George Eliot was less anxious to be known as a novelist than as a poetess. From the numerous volumes of delightful essays Stevenson produced, there is reason to suspect that even he - prince of romancers as he was - preferred the essay form of composition to novel-writing.

Novelists on their Art.

To most authors of the better sort the novel has been mainly a species of literary pot-boiler. They have written novels, not because they considered that the best, most useful, or most congenial work they could do, but because they found it the most profitable. The public does not so much want to be edified as to be amused; and the author who wishes to make something beyond his salt must keep his ideas, but trot out his puppets. Mr. Grant Allen, in the heyday of his career as a brilliant and versatile litterateur, and himself a prolific and successful novelist, wrote:

I do not approve of novels. They are for the most part a futile and unprofitable form of literature; and it may be profoundly regretted that the mere blind laws of supply and demand should have diverted such an immense number of the ablest minds in England, France, and America from more serious subjects to the production of such very frivolous and, on the whole, ephemeral works of art.

By this time of day the novelists can well afford to have their art estimated at something like its true value. No class of literary men have received more of the favours of the public, not only in the form of fame and 'honours,' but also in the form of hard cash for comparatively light and facile labours. (I can well remember being struck as a boy with the description given of the change that came over Walter Scott's method of work when, in his later days, he turned from novels to write the 'Life of Napoleon.' It was no longer a case of reeling off 'a chapter of 'The Pirate' before breakfast.' It had been his custom to

write rapidly and easily, one hand on the desk and the other left free to caress the head of the hound Maida by his knee; but now he sat surrounded by piles of volumes - on the table and around him on the floor - to which he made frequent reference, the work proceeding with a comparative slowness which must have been specially irksome to him, pressed as he was by the necessity of making money, and long accustomed to the habit of rapid and careless composition.)

By persistent puffery and mutual log-rolling some of them have succeeded in persuading a large section of the reading public that excellence in prose fiction represents the high-water mark of literary production, and that if there be anything of moment the public has to learn from books the approved medium for its communication is the novel. And this latter idea has found so much acceptance that everything must now be cast more or less in the novel form. History, politics, economics, sociology, art, physical science, 'the sex question' - all are filtered in driblets through the novel,

One result of this straining-after knowledge-made-easy is that the reading public, though enormously enlarged, is a public possessing less of the power of close reading and sustained thinking than belonged to the generations which read 'The Spirit of Laws,' 'The Decline and Fall,' 'The Letters of Junius,' which read Hume, Burke, and Adam Smith, Channing, Emerson, and John Stuart Mill. Without wishing to make too much of the saying that 'a little learning is a dangerous thing,' it is still easy to see that much harm may be done by confining the teaching of grown-up people mainly to those things that can be served up through the medium of the novel. The powers of the mind, like those of the body, become atrophied from disuse; and a population fed upon the spoon-meat of fiction is bound to lose the power of making that use of the mental molars which all serious problems require for their proper mastication.

The Novel with a Purpose.

The novel without a purpose is often a sorry inanity enough; but in view of the importance attached to the novel with a purpose, it requires to be said that even the latter leaves much to be desired on the score of utility. Not a few of our young people of both sexes are developing the habit of thinking that they understand a subject and are entitled to lay down the law upon it merely because they have read some novelist's fragmentary and superficial treatment of it. Large sections of the population are 'free lovers,' chauvinists, or rebels, according to the special type of fiction they happen to have alighted upon; but whatever they may be they are shallow and ill-informed in it, because their mental constitution has been nourished on the shreds and snippets of the novelist's literary confectionery.

Even the imaginative faculties and the sense of humour are dulled by this sort of reading. Acquaint a man with facts and general principles, and his imagination must of necessity work upon the materials he assimilates - for facts are more suggestive, more stimulating, than speculations or fancies - while his sense of proportion will be cultivated by his knowledge of the actual relations of things. But the person who makes himself or herself a mere conduit for the impressions, the imaginings of others will in time possess a mind mainly of the cataleptic order, with less originality than if he had read nothing at all. Who

is more vacuous and artificial than the person gorged with fiction, who in a given situation cannot help thinking of what his or her heroes or heroines would have said or done in similar circumstances?

If one could see the class of novel-readers passing up and on from that sort of mental pabulum to stronger meat, it would be possible to regard the novel as an unmixed blessing. But in point of fact, novel-reading, so far from being a mere stage in the intellectual development of the reader, is in the majority of cases a life-habit. The assistants at public libraries could tell of tens of thousands of people who, all their lives through, never, save by mistake, take out any books except works of fiction. There are, of course, men and women who seek recreation from arduous brain work in light reading, which invariably means novels. That is natural enough; though there are some who consider Macaulay as light and certainly brighter, more vivid, than Gaboriau. But the great mass of the readers using the lending libraries go on devouring novel after novel, never dreaming of making an excursion into the field of general literature. It were really better for such if the insipid stuff were not available for them at all: they might then be driven into reading ever so small a portion of a good book once in a while.

Remedies.

For a long time, probably, little can be done to lessen the evil. Some improvement might be effected by library committees spending less of their income on works of fiction and more of it on dear and inaccessible books - which is the direct contrary of their present policy - but even then a large number of the confirmed novel-readers would simply go to the private circulating libraries for their only literary diet. And the conversion of the library committees would of itself take some time and trouble.

The improvement of education, along the line of attaching greater significance to the teaching of English literature as a school subject, would do much to produce an extended taste for good literature and a wiser discrimination in the choice of books. But unless something can be done with the writers as well as with the readers, the improvement will be slow and attended with difficulty. Grant Allen’s admission that the blind laws of supply and demand have diverted an immense number of the ablest minds to the production of novels is very significant. Since the days when Milton sold the greatest epic in the language for £5, letters have become to too great an extent a mere profession; and to the man who writes for a living, the temptation to turn out that which can be written fluently, and which appeals to a large public, is very strong.

But there are signs that those who do the hard and necessary work of the world will insist more and more, as time goes on, upon greatly reduced hours of labour, greatly increased leisure, and a larger share of the good things of life in general. The effects of this will tell on literature in a number of ways. Increased leisure and the power to purchase good books, following on the wide diffusion of better education, will bring about a steady improvement in the general standard of literary taste. That much will be effected so far as the *demand* of the reading public is concerned.

But social and economic amelioration will also have its effects on the *supply* of books. For one thing, men and women of parts, finding the ordinary business of life much less irksome and exacting than they do at present, will be content to earn a livlihood in the trades and professions, cultivating literature as Shakespeare and Bacon, Burns, Lamb, and Mill cultivated it - that is to say, as amateurs, not less but more brilliant than the professionals, because freed from the necessity of writing for a living, and able to give us of their best.

Of course we shall always have a professional literary class. There is as much need for the making of good books as for the building of houses; and the author is as worthy of his hire as any other labourer. A writer who spends the better part of a lifetime in the production of one great work (as Gibbon did), or a vast synthetic series (as Herbert Spencer did), will do his work better if he has no other vocation seriously to divide his attention. In such cases substantial remuneration will not only be politic, but also just and necessary.

But as Matthew Arnold well said 'Literary production, where it is sound, is its own exceeding great reward'; and with literature valued more for its own sake and less as a means of making money, the spinning of cobwebs of fiction may well be reduced to a minimum. The professional literary man, with his dyspepsia, his insomnia, his nervous headaches, his smoking of 'infinite tobacco,' and his disordered nerves, may thus in coming years be remembered only as one of the strange phenomena of the nineteenth century. Then men of talent may cease taking 'orders,' as the late Mr. Justin M'Carthy did, for two score of tales at a time, and the Garvices and Corellis may lend a hand with the really useful and necessary work of the world.

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