Readers and Critics.

BY FELIX HOPE.

PART II.

Although the modern novel is apt to excel its predecessors in most of the qualities of its craft, there is one respect in which it seems to fall curiously short, and that is the essential virtue of telling a story. Character-drawing has gained in subtlety, construction is more workmanlike, sentiment is sincerer, but in the simple art of narrative the modern novelist is commonly far behind the traditional masters of the Victorian era. And, after all, the very essence of the novel is that it should tell a story. If the artist fails in that he fails in the secret of his business. It matters little how clever he may be; if he cannot tell his tale he must necessarily have mistaken his vocation.

"Speech is to silence as time is to eternity." We are concerned in our daily lives with incidents which are sad and incidents which are joyous; with episodes which are wreathed with laughter and others which are deluged in tears; and we make a great fuss over them, as though they were our chief concern in life. Meanwhile, how do these things look when viewed, as Spinoza said, "*sub specie eternitatis*?" They all happen in Time, which is a human invention, at all events a condition under which the human intelligence works. "Life, like a dome of many coloured glass, stains the white radiance of Eternity." Essential things alone matter; and being essential they are far remote from our noisy thoroughfares. Let it be a consolation in
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our troubles that beyond these voices there is peace. Or if you do not care for these metaphysical and mystical explanations, there is a simpler illustration. Only at certain points do mundane worries touch the soul of man. Everything changes, is transformed, disappears. Only love reveals the eternal. That is why the love of Valerie du Toit and Stephen Lawrie lifts them far above the accidents of their career and remains even in the wreck of their hopes and ambitions. So, too, the love of Romeo and Juliet led straight to tragedy. But the love does not die when the lovers die. It remains eternal. It is like silence, which is often so much greater, so much more illuminating, than speech.

Leisure and Work,—the two ideas are to some minds inconsistent, but here is their point of meeting. "To do their duty is their only holiday," is a description we read of Athenian character in Thucydides. *To work their minds*, that too is their holiday, their true *σχολή*, the leisure that is worthy of one who is at heart more than a mere mechanic, whose energies are not all spent upon task-work done to order, with quick returns of profit as his reward, but who has free activities of mind which claim scope and play, energies which are voluntary, self-imposed, delightful; which result in the discipline, the quickening of every human faculty; unless, it may be, in the estimation of those who believe only in machinery, but for all who would not sacrifice the ends of life to the means, to be counted among the first conditions of existence.

What would one not to give to read Rosalind's reminiscences of Shakespeare, Jeanie Deans' memories of Scott, Becky Sharp's life of Thackeray, or Rochester's opinions of Charlotte Brontë? Pygmalion shapes his Galatea according to his heart's desire, but one wonders whether

the flesh and blood reality was more satisfying than the marble. And, anyhow, what did Galatea think of her creator? One might hazard a wide solution, but the creatures of imagination do not commonly rise to deliver judgment on their makers; for, after all, we are not entitled to ask of a novelist that he should make us believe, but only that he should arouse our interest or sympathy by showing us the effect of belief on the actions and characters of the believer.
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On considering the function of the critic—Coleridge, Arnold, Lowell—each in some of his most notable papers, applied his own code or standard to the study of Wordsworth, with widely differing results. From this we see that the merely "interpretation" theory of criticism is not the highest. Every critic should be an interpreter; most of us can scarce hope ever to be more. But for critics of the higher race there is a more important duty, to assess and rank; to pontificate, if you will.

Literary "centenaries" have been widely observed since they were found to provide admirable excuses for literary beanfeasts. In fact, any great writer of the past contrives to score two centenaries in one century—which seems strange, until you remember that he died, as well as was born, and that your enthusiast is prepared to commemorate both events in the same way and with an equal gusto. It may appear a little odd to mark the anniversary of a death—and that, perhaps, a most tragic death—by elaborate Junketry. But this, after all, is a question of taste. Anyhow, when a centenary (or bi- or tercentenary, whether of birth or death) comes along, it is pounced upon by the minor literary folk of to-day. They form committees, they advertise themselves, they write articles, make speeches, feel tremendously important, and have a good time generally. And such activity, inept as it is, does no-one any harm. It may even do some good: it may induce some people to read, for the first time, the work of a great master.

We are witnessing at the moment one of those "returns" on which the historian of literature loves so complacently to dwell. The return on this occasion is taking place in the domain of criticism—a return from appreciation to principles.

After all, a good bookshop is a more thrilling place than any library, however admirable, can be. In it the man with but little spare cash makes his decision for better or worse. We do not envy the man who cannot look back at least one moment, if only in boyhood, to a bookshop when he became as pure an idealist as any saint—when he gave all that he had, and sacrificed the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, for a book that should be a spiritual possession. No
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library can afford the occasion for struggles of soul so tense as these; and the bookseller is richer than the librarian by the nature of his opportunity. Doubtless, it is as hard for the bookseller to live up to his ideal as it is for any other man. He cannot interfere with the demand for the best-sellers; his business is to supply it. "But the majority of people go to a bookshop," writes Mr. Frank Swinnerton, "as they do to a circulating library, not knowing what they want. That is the good bookseller's chance. He has to be something of psychologist, something of a scholar, and wholly an enthusiast. He has to gauge the limits of his customers, and to persuade them to take the best that it is possible for them to take. If best-sellers are necessary, then he can urge them to the best of the best-sellers; after all, probably half the good books will be found among them. This is his active part; on the other side, he is bound by the honour of his

craft to stock all the classics that he can. If only this passive part were more generally performed, we imagine from what they have told us that the publishers would not be backward in making the heritage accessible."

"Some time ago," wrote W. L. Courtney, "there was an unprofitable discussion concerning criticism—whether it could ever be constructive or merely analytical. Of course, there can be no finality in controversies of this sort, nor can there even be temporary agreement, so long as the terms are left indefinite. Criticism must be analytical, if its main task be insisted on. The author writes a book; the dramatist produces a play; and the critic, with the particular work before him, has to analyse it, break it up, perhaps, into its component parts, and understand its meaning, its drift, its tendency. So much is clear, as is also the fact that we are here dealing with the simplest, the least important, the most ordinary aspect of criticism. But sometimes, if we take up a book of critical essays, like *Some Authors* by the last Sir Walter Raleigh, or *The Continuity of Letters* by John Bailey, we become aware that criticism is taking upon itself fresh functions. Read the chapter on Boccaccio, on Don Quixote, on Burns, in the former work; or on the "Grand Style" in the latter work, and you will realise that an analytical process only counts for a mere half of the whole task achieved by these critics, and that Sir
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Walter Raleigh, to a large extent, and Mr. Bailey to a less, but still very significant extent, are creative artists, either adding to the materials before them something that was not to be perceived before, or illuminating their topics with flashes of brilliant insight, so as to make them the more easily comprehensible. Such criticism, surely, deserves the title of constructive."

For the desire to read, like all other desires which distract our unhappy souls, is capable of analysis. It may be for good books, for bad books, or for indifferent books. But it is always despotic in its demands, and when it appears, at whatever hour of day or night, we must rise and slink off at its heels, only allowing ourselves to ask, as we desert the responsibilities and privileges of active life, one very important question—Why? Why, that is, this sudden passion for Pepys or Rimbaud? Why turn the house upside down to discover *Macaulay's Life and Letters*? Why will nothing do except Beckford's *Thoughts on Hunting*?. Why demand first Disraeli's novels and then Dr. Bentley's biography? The answer to all these questions, were they forthcoming, would be valuable, for it is when thus beckoned and compelled by the force of a book's character as a whole that the reader is most capable of speaking the truth about it if he has the mind. What then is the desire that makes us turn instinctively to Sir Thomas Browne? It is the desire to be steeped in imagination. But that is only a snapshot outline of a state of mind which, even as we stand fumbling at the bookcase, can be developed a little more clearly.

It would be a sorry source of satisfaction to find that people were reading more than hitherto, if the books they read were worthless, or worse than worthless. Even apart from the writings placed on an *index expurgatorius* on moral or theological grounds, there are many books that are better left unread, if only because they take up the time which might have been spent in reading something better. For this reason we should be delighted to learn that, whether in the public libraries or elsewhere, more people were engaged, not merely in reading, but in reading books well worthy of being read. For there are some books which may have an injurious effect, others merely afford harmless amusement, and others which may be read with profit as well
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as pleasure. And in this matter it must be remembered that what is one man's meat is another's poison. But in any case this discrimination has nothing to do with the common and somewhat invidious distinction drawn between such literature as works of fiction, plays, poems and romances on the one hand, and such serious reading as works of science and history and philosophy on the other. Yet, strange to say, many good people, many austere moralists and instructors of youth, are apt to confuse these diverse classifications.

Perhaps there never was a time when English fiction, taking it as a whole, had so much cleverness and so little charm. Certainly the average reader is immensely grateful for a story that interests him. But he is woefully bored by the interminable flow of dingy sex-novels, themselves almost interminable. He wants writers—some there are, but he craves more—who discern what is fine in human nature, who do not merely view men and women as morbid psychological studies. That is why one is always a little frightened when one sees announced the publication of hitherto unknown writings of a famous author. Scraps never intended for publication, even such things as account books and hotel bills, may have a value for the biographer. But things of this kind have no place among a writer's works unless it is possible to conceive of his having been himself willing to give them one.

Inevitably the great stories of the world attract ambitious writers, who gather like moths round the flame—and sometimes get their wings singed for their presumption. Their fate never acts as a deterrent to others, nor is their experience of much value for those who come after them. Age after age poets, novelists, dramatists, cluster round the immortal legends where, in the absence of details, there is large room for the exercise of imagination and fancy. The tragedy of Faust, the romance of Helen, the sublime courage of Judith, the story of Ulysses, the doom of the Wandering Jew, the wickedness of Don Juan—these and their like are the themes which excite ardent spirits to give their own version of tales which were never young and are never likely to grow old.

It may be objected that while the serious historical or

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philosophical books may be read with profit, the ordinary modern novel can at best provide harmless amusement—and, as we are often reminded, many novels exert an evil influence. But the censor of novels may do well to consider whether some of his own serious books are not in the same case. As many of the said serious books maintain diametrically opposite views in history and philosophy, it seems clear that one or other must be in the wrong. And, on the other hand, the very fact that some works of fiction can do harm to their readers serves as a refutation of the other contention that they merely minister to our amusement. Cardinal Newman made use of the Protestant practice of burning the Pope in effigy as an argument for the Catholic veneration of images. For the burning was meant to insult the Pope. And so, in like manner, the veneration paid to an image is really directed to the person represented by it. If you can do one thing by means of an effigy, you can do the other also. In much the same way it may be said that if it is possible to do harm, by means of a novel, it is also possible to do good, and a popular novelist may exert an influence for good through a wide circle of readers. But while moral and religious censors often raise an outcry against the offenders in this matter, we seldom hear a word of praise given to those who are doing good service.

The truth is that criticism seems to run through three distinctive phases. It is negative at first, or, rather, neutral, with no bias one way or another. It commences its work with cool,

unprejudiced receptivity, keeping itself open to all suggestions and impressions which reach it during the perusal of the matter in question. Then comes a second stage, in which active reasoning, not passive intuition, is at work—the process of judging has begun, and the critic is endeavouring to appraise, to appreciate in the ordinary sense of the term, to weigh in the balance, to discover whether appreciation or depreciation is the more likely issue. And then side by side with the judgment runs the keen, alert, and ever-ready sympathy, the resolute attempt to put oneself in the author's position and see things from his point of view. Sympathy is all-important; without it you can arrive at a decision, but you cannot secure the infinitely more important "interpretation" which is or
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ought to be the critic's ideal. "Interpretation" is the word which covers the whole process, and gives the most succinct explanation of both method and end. Ability to revert to elementary beauties is a test that judgment remains sound.

The critic, I mean the man with the critical temperament, is naturally contemplative; a wise passiveness is part of his natural equipment. It is the active, practical persons, who are worldings, the "business" men, the "managing" women, who are in the greatest hurry to have opinions over works of art; for the simple reason that rapidity of judgment is an asset in this busy, pushing world, and the worldings carry the habits of that world into the very different world of art.

Was it not Anatole France who said that the last utterance of mankind would be criticism? Two men would be left alone on the earth, and one would say to the other, "How beautiful!" (or "Not half-bad!" or "Rather rotten, what!"), then the earth's crust would break up, and all would be over. Meanwhile, and though nobody that I know of has prophesied the immediate end of the world, human utterance is largely criticism—or else anti-criticism. For, as business is other people's money, so criticism seems, in popular usage, to be other people's opinions. That is why it is generally reprobated. I think the fashionable tone of protest against it is a good sign. It shows that people prefer their own opinions and must be assumed, therefore, to have opinions to prefer. "In the bad old days," writes Mr. A. B. Walkley, "when critics were regarded as law-givers and a docile world never presumed to question the judgments of Aristotle or the Abbé Batteux, objectors to "the critics" would have been drawn and quartered for high treason. "'Tis what the King says, boy; and that was ever enough for Sir Henry Lee." In more recent times, when "the rules" had become a little fly-blown, people still treated eminent critics as their spiritual directors. "Is it fresh?" asked the old lady of Dan Leno, as the shopman selling the chicken, "Fresh, marm! Can't you see the Government stamp?" To-day all the old ladies insist on smelling the chicken for themselves." The expert witness has been sharply told to stand down.
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We do not accept the opinions of any other people as authoritative; we are rather affronted by other people having opinions; we are all in a hurry to have opinions of our own.

"The great stumbling-block of literary criticism," a Laureate once wrote, "alike for the professional critic and the unprofessional reader, is the tacit assumption that the opinions, preferences, and estimates of to-day are not merely passing opinions, preferences, and estimates, but will be permanent ones; opinions, preferences, and estimates for all future time. There is no foundation, save self-complacency, for such a surmise." What solid reason is there

to suppose that the present age is any more infalliable [sic] in its literary judgments than preceding ages? On the contrary, its infallibility is all the less probable because of the precipitation with which its opinions are arrived at. Yet past ages have been proved over and over again, in course of time, to be wrong in their estimate of contemporaneous poetry, in consequence of their mistaking the passing for the permanent. The consequence in our time of this error has been that one has seen the passing away of several works loudly declared on their appearance to be immortal. The only chance a critic has of being right in his judgments is to measure contemporary literature by standards and canons upon which rests the fame of the great poets and writers of the past, and, tried by which, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron have been assigned their enduring rank in the poetic hierarchy.

It is a temptation to a reviewer to measure his cleverness with that of the author. In our debased currency of language we are so ready to regard criticism as fault-finding and not as mere judgment. The realm of the spirit surely is the realm for all men; its portal is not held for the entry of only the minority, the elect. To say this is not to ask for wishy-washy kindness in reviewing. Let it be as stern as it will, but let its sternness and the reasons for its sternness be understood by the plain man. Moreover, let it remember all the time that it has the missionary responsibility. It is carrying good news—when it is good news—far and wide "to every creature." It would have no monopoly of the precious and invisible treasures. Then the plain man may find that old interests which a hard world has deadened in

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these past years may be aroused again. It may be his Renaissance. We judge a writer to be good because we like him, not because he is free from qualities that an unstable system of values terms "faults." The merit of a work cannot be gauged methodically by subtracting the sum of its defects from that of its virtues; analysis of its component parts into good and bad may beguile an idle hour, but can lead us no nearer an estimate of its poetic worth, which exists only in the synthesis. The particular follies of one age may be the glory of the next age's anthologies. Judgment by taste is an answering pastime, in which the critic should not compromise himself too seriously. Books are meant not for cold storage in the critic's or reader's mind, but for gratifying inspiration. The more a man has read in certain authors, the more anxious he becomes to get at close quarters with the mind that made the books he likes.