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ARTICLE V.

THE READER'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE POWER OF LITERATURE.

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IT must have fallen at some time to the lot of almost every student of literature who is at once sensitive and observant of his own sensations to notice a disparity between his perceptions and his feelings. Every cultivated man knows that certain attributes in a book ought to awaken pain or pleasure; he knows that pains and pleasures of a certain kind have actually attended the perusal of the book; he has, in other words, two sources or reservoirs of critical knowledge. It seems an easy task—it is certainly a diverting exercise—to associate and compare this double evidence; but the hopes of the inquirer are often dashed by results that are questionable and perplexing. It is easy enough to name merits in writings that please us and faults in writings that we do not like; but the instant we endeavor to establish an equation or a ratio, the instant we endeavor to associate the degrees of our pain or pleasure with corresponding intensities in the beauties or transgressions that excite them, that instant we are baffled and discomfited; we begin to despair of the usefulness of criticism.

The discipline of reflections and experiences such as these conducts us to interesting conclusions. We see that degrees of merit are not deducible from the inspection and comparison of literary traits. We see that any scheme of criticism that rests upon the designation of requirements, and calculations

of the measure in which these requirements have been individually and collectively fulfilled, is a scheme which is certain to be profitless. To adopt the method of the school-examiner, to compute and combine percentages of attainment, is felt to be ridiculous and hopeless. The equations will not balance; the totals will not correspond. Books that have charmed or shaken us in the perusal reward analysis with a shorter list and poorer quality of merits than books which have only pleased; and the work which disgusts or vexes us is found on experiment to be no more assailable than the work which we tolerate or admire. There are novels which we reprobate for slighter infringements of the laws of plot than those we have condoned in Thackeray; there are poems which we chastise for fainter solecisms than those we have allowed in Browning. Works survive in defiance of standards, and perish in conformity with them. We are often nettled, in the reading of criticism, by contact with some long and strenuous indictment, —an indictment the more irritating that its counts are incapable of disproof,—which castigates and mutilates some favorite writer whose worth so far outweighs the proofs of it that truth itself is felt to be a calumny. We are often vexed, in the writing of criticism, to find merit evaporate in the effort to account for it; we are staggered by the paucity of demonstrable beauties and the profusion of indisputable faults. It is sometimes easy to praise what we want to censure, and easy to censure what we want to praise. The feelings and the intellect are both on the jury, and the jury refuses to agree.

The method of Addison in criticising "Paradise Lost" exemplifies the difficulty we have been trying to explain. He first lays down four fields or categories of merit,—the fable, the characters, the sentiments, and the language; he appraises Milton's excellence in each, and leaves the reader to deduce

the value of the poem from the average or aggregation of the merits of the parts. The justice of the censure which condemns such criticism as superficial is manifest enough; in feeling the whole may be more or less than the sum of the parts, and the intensity of the generated sentiment is by no means always traceable to commensurate energy in the producing cause.

Since, then, the listing and gauging of strengths and weaknesses confers no prevision of the reader's sentiments, let us turn to the laws of human feeling for an explanation of the apparent disparity between the writer's work and the reader's experience.

It is a matter of universal certainty that our mood, our disposition, the momentary dip or tilt of our inclinations, has a powerful and obvious influence on the quality of our experience. The same scenery, the same poetry, the same novel, appeal with varying force to varying moods of the same percipient. The eye of weariness will find as little pleasure in a cherished landscape as the taste of sickness in a favorite food. A mood of disgust or cynicism will level the best and the poorest of natural or artistic products into an equal incapacity to stimulate or delight us. The fatigue of an extended visit to a picture-gallery will suffice in the end to neutralize all the difference between a painting of Angelo and a common daub. We are subject in the same way to expanding and intensifying influences. The vigor of early morning, the glow of health, the wonder of childhood, the responsiveness of youth, the incentives of sympathy,—all these are things that heighten almost incalculably the power of the outer world upon our consciousness. A willingness to feel, which expands our receptivity, a willingness to be pleased, which purveys its own sustenance, account for half the intensity and half the delight-

fulness which mark our relation to the world around us. It is obvious that works of literature are included in the circle of this law. The effect of a literary work is a question partly of material, partly of the reader's mood. That it is the function of literature to supply the material is admitted on all hands; it is not quite so clearly or universally admitted that it is also its function to supply the mood.

The power of any literary instrument—a description, a witticism, an incident, a simile—is partly dependent on its own worth, partly on the state of mind in which it finds the reader. If it finds him appreciative and receptive, its mediocrity will not prevent its success; if it finds him sluggish or perverse, its excellence will not prevent its failure. The immediate cause of the stimulations and excitements of great literature lies more in the reader's than the author's mind. The materials in Hamlet are far better than those in Gorboduc; but the good we get from Hamlet depends far more upon the sympathetic and receptive mood in which we read it than upon the excellence of its materials. If it were possible to interchange the moods while we kept the matter; if we could read Hamlet with the mind we bring to Gorboduc, and Gorboduc with the mind we bring to Hamlet,—we might not find their values interchanged, but we should be amazed at the diminution of the interval.

The operation of disgustful and unattractive work is subject to a parallel law. A book is not ruined by its faults; they are as often as not no greater than the faults of masterpieces; it is ruined by the spirit of cavil and hostility which, originating in some of its faults, becomes the discoverer and magnifier of others. An error has no unalterable value, no fixed and measurable consequence; it may be flagrant in one case, excusable in another, imperceptible in a third. Faults

are not faulty in proportion to the extent to which they are committed; they are faulty to the extent to which they are observed. Good writers do not secure immunity by the avoidance of mistakes; they avert their penalties by a skillful diversion. The blemishes of good writers and the felicities of poor ones are alike certain to be underrated. It is perfectly well known that the bad works of great authors and the bad parts of their better works are received with enthusiasm by the circle of their devotees; their dullness interests and their folly edifies; they are credited with graces which they never meant, and profundities which they never saw. It is easy to forget, in upbraiding the fanaticism of this worship, that the best books are read by the best readers in a spirit which differs from these morbid moods in no other respect than its freedom from extravagance. In the light of these conclusions, the disparity between feeling and perception, which introduced and prompted this discussion, is perceived to be natural and unavoidable. The reader brings or generates half his own sensations; it is therefore useless to search in the author for the explanation of the whole. In ordinary criticism we seek to find in the materials alone the genesis of effects which are traceable in part to the materials, in part to the reader's consciousness. It is unsafe to put any definite values, positive or negative, on the observance or neglect of grammar, on purity or barbarism of diction, on regularity or license of rhyme, on firmness or laxity of plot, on vividness or tameness of character. The power of these elements varies with every combination into which they enter, and the measure of their efficacy in a given case must be tried by the issue of subjective experiment. Such criticisms as those of Macaulay on the poems of Robert Montgomery, or those of Lowell on the style of Merivale, might be charged with narrowness, and even

triviality, if the tangled metaphor and peccant English which the censors specify were actually admitted as the grounds of condemnation. The real sin of the flagellated authors lay not so much in the admission of blunders which might feed an appetite for reprehension, as in leaving the minds of their judges so unoccupied and unimpressed that they had time to remember to be critical and exacting.

The reader's mood is sovereign. What, then, is the source or basis of this mood? Commonly, though by no means always, it is found in the materials themselves: materials embracing, in this usage, thought, emotion, purpose, treatment, style; the sum, in short, of the writer's contributions. The materials often, at least, evoke the mood; but the mood, once evoked, reshapes and transforms the materials. The value of an excellence lies not so much in its intrinsic power to please, as in its tendency to wake and warm the reader's sympathies. The danger of a fault lies not so much in the pain that it inflicts or the pleasure that it cancels, as in its power to check and chill the rising sensibilities. Hence it happens that whatever induces the right mood, whatever ingratiates and wins, whatever whets appetite or inspires affection, is great, perhaps predominant in its literary effect.

This truth is the justification of style. The possession of style, that is of a form of language corresponding to the principles of beauty, enables a writer from the very start to oblige and gratify a sensitive reader; and an obliged and gratified reader becomes forthwith a grateful and indulgent one. This is the true philosophy of the higher or æsthetic properties of style; it is even in no small measure the controlling factor in its lower and less graceful attributes. The evil of obscurity, for instance, lies less in the dimness it entails, or the labor it imposes, than in the vitiated and unfriendly temper which it causes in the reader.

Another truth which these principles elucidate, is the mighty influence of tone in literature. The utterance of thoughts in a certain tone has been designated as the source of literary power. This is the quality which accounts for the surprising difference between works whieh are reducible to kindred elements and describable in almost the same terms. Now the tone of a work is nothing more than the consequence or reflection of the author's mood; and that the author's mood should govern or at least affect the reader's is clear enough to dispense with demonstration.

Another fact which falls into clearness and relation through a clear grasp of the foregoing principles is the somewhat singular and perhaps ungenerous attitude of readers towards authors whose reputations are confused and diversified by the production of much that is excellent and of more that is commonplace. It would seem, at first sight, as if the only just measure of poets like Wordsworth, consisted in the absolute quantity of superlative or exquisite performance; as if the gauge of value were to be found in the proportion of their merit to those of other writers, and nowise in the proportion of their own grain to their own stubble. It is found in practice, however, that common and critical judgments alike are more or less biased by the latter ratio; and the cause, if not the sanction of this propensity, is found in the principle we have just unfolded. Everything depends upon the reader's receptivity; and the thing which makes him willing and anxious to receive is the assurance, or at least the likelihood, of vivid pleasure. Let this confidence be unsettled by the experience of long tracts of arid and unprofitable work, and the reader finds that he has lost, or at all events impaired, his faculty of self-abandonment. Except in poems or passages where familiarity has confirmed his faith, he approaches the

poet with a mixture of eagerness and misgiving; the dubiousness of the result impairs the completeness of the surrender; and the strong parts suffer from the abundance of their opposites. One opens one's mouth rather charily at the bidding of a companion who has often petted us with bonbons, but has sometimes cheated us with stones and straws.

The diversities of critical judgment on the part of keen and equally receptive minds are clearly explained by the acceptance of our theory. If excellence lay primarily or solely in the merits of the work, it would be hard to account for the wide disparities of verdict revealed by persons who are perfectly qualified to recognize those merits. But if we once perceive that the success of a book depends on the coöperation of the reader, and that this coöperation is liable to be balked or furthered by a score of indeterminable partialities or aversions, disagreement ceases to evoke surprise. If every literary sensation is the outcome of a partnership, it is obvious that the sensation is liable to change through a change in the identity of either of the partners. A hundred circumstances of an extra literary quality contribute to the formation or the dispersion of the fitting mood, and the circumstance which helps with one reader may hinder with the next. Abundance of powerful and moving incident will awaken the interest of one class while it stupefies that of another. The employment of learned and remote allusion will act in one case as the provocative, in another as the extinguisher, of sympathy. The sensual and fervid portrayal of erotic love will act as a spur to the enthusiasm of some, and as a curb to the sympathy of others. There is a difference also in degrees of susceptibility, as well as in the causes which excite or suppress it. Women are as a rule better readers and worse critics than men, because they are more subject to accesses of enthusiasm; they respond

with more alacrity, and hence with less discrimination, to the emotional and literary appeal. There is a degree of sensibility which unfits a mind for the task of criticism; a responsiveness so facile and so absolute that, in awarding its full measure of possible enthusiasm to the incitements of third-rate or fourth-rate books, it has clearly left itself without a standard for the appraisal and distinguishing of higher types.

We have seen that literary success means partly the provision of food and partly the instilling of appetite. It is certain that the appetite is often excited by the food; it is certain, also, that it is excitable by other causes. Let us note a few of the influences, not in themselves literary, which may generate in the reader's mind the feelings proper to great literature.

One of the most efficacious of all the substitutes for literary excellence is the veneration for antiquity; and the most interesting of the phases in which this feeling has declared itself is the passion for Greek and Latin classics. There is no doubt that the contents of the ancient literatures are intrinsically noble; but it is probable, I should say certain, that the effects of these literatures have far excelled the merits of their contents. The temper of mind which merit induces, is induced, in the case of the classics, by feelings external to merit. The reader who cuts for the first time the pages of his Pindar or Catullus brings in most instances to their perusal an intelligence already quickened and prepossessed. The vanity of acquisition, which heightens the zest of every writing in a foreign tongue; the sense, always exhilarating, and particularly vivid in the instance of the classics, of a traversed distance, of a lifted veil, an explored sanctuary; the historic estimate of the value of these languages, and the splendor and dignity of their career; the fine exclusiveness of a pleasure undebased by vulgar participation,—all these things produce

a frame of mind which multiplies by two the excellence of every beauty, and divides by two the harmfulness of every fault. Effects of this kind are indistinguishable in the reader's consciousness—indeed, if our theory is true, they are indistinguishable in simple fact—from the effects of literary merit; the only distinction to be made is that the decisive stimulus which in Milton or Shelley is produced solely by literary merit is engendered in the classics half by the literary merit and half by mere association.

Antiquity, then, may take the place of excellence: by a curious though not abnormal contrast, the same result is found to be accessible through novelty. There is a type of mind, embracing a rather extensive fraction of the minds which occupy themselves with literature, which is quickened to the maximum of interest by that which is recent and contemporary. This kindled and responsive temper so magnifies and transfigures the materials submitted to its view that the second-rate, if new, will affect it like a masterpiece. An exotic and external interest has taken the place, and done the work, of quality. The first successes of rising poets, the popular novels, of whose bright and marvelous careers so many instances have signalized the last decade, not only win the esteem, but actually, for their period of vogue, perform the task, of greatness. People find in current literature the qualities of supreme excellence, because they approach it with the absorbent and receptive temper which supreme excellence alone is competent to perpetuate and justify.

There are other causes which exert a cognate influence. The magnetism of a famous name induces in the correlative faculty an aptitude for apprehension and enjoyment which makes the question of actual desert in the owner of the reputation a matter of inappreciable or at least inferior significance. This

is the temper of docile mediocrity; minds of a wider range and a hardier independence are often equally stimulated by exactly opposite conditions. It is said, that, among the very few propensities which detract from the judicial equipoise of Saint-Beuve, was a disposition to overrate the merit of neglected writers to whose real though not commanding excellence he had recalled the interest of a neglectful public. It would be easy enough to multiply examples of this external and factitious intervention. Every man is a sheaf of feelings and opinions, almost any one of which may act as a furtherance or an obstacle to the production of the requisite mood. If these causes operate in the right direction, he will get the first grade of benefit out of the second grade of performance; he will even secure the profits of literature where the power of literature is entirely wanting. A parent reads the effusions of his child with an intellectual stimulation that is quite as genuine, and perhaps almost as valuable, as that which his taste derives from the monuments of English poetry. In childhood itself we find the aptest and most vivid illustration of the reader's contribution to the fruitfulness of reading. Admitting, for the sake of argument, that receptiveness is the foundation of the enjoyments and benefits procurable from literature, it is evident that, if we could bring about a state of mind which would be constitutionally and permanently receptive,—receptive at least of everything that experience made intelligible,—we should practically have done away with the necessity of literary merit. In the state of childhood, in the state of barbarism, there are conditions of wonder and sympathy which substantiate in a measure the requirements of our hypothesis. It is found accordingly, that with children and barbarians the simplest and rudest efforts of intelligible composition are adequate to the functions of the best and finest lit-

erature. In infancy, whether individual or tribal, the reader does so much, that the writer does, or at least is required to do, very little; the history of literary growth is the record of the increase of exertion and accomplishment by which the writer endeavors to make good the reader's growing indolence and coyness.

The results of my argument may be formulated thus: (1) the immediate cause of literary effects is a heightened receptiveness on the part of the reader; (2) it is the peculiar faculty and task of genius to inspire this receptiveness; (3) materials are more valuable as stimuli than as food; (4) the effects of one grade of literature may be brought about by lower grades where causes of an external kind bring about the needful receptiveness.

I hold that there is nothing in these propositions derogatory to the rank or ascendency of genius; the gulf between superior and ordinary minds remains just as broad and just as impassable as under the light of any other theory. I am disposed to believe, it is true, that the salutary and nutrient value of materials has been somewhat overestimated. I emphasize the reader's contribution,—the receptive and hospitable mood. But it is clear that in the majority of cases this contribution must itself be evoked by the writer; and it is hard to see why the generation of a mood should not be as hard a task and as honorable a performance as the purveyance of superlative materials. The reader's interest once evoked, however, is a substitute for the writer's power. It requires all the art of the finished history to enchain the thought of the casual reader, but the man who wrote the history found force and spirit in the musty chronicle. It is probable that, if the works of Homer and Dante and Goethe and Shakespeare should be abolished from the libraries, and effaced from the memory of

the cultured world, we should get from writers of the second class a large part of the help and pleasure we now derive from the undoubted masters. The enthusiasm which has hitherto reserved itself for the rarest and most exquisite appeals, would remain, when these appeals had ceased, an enduring property of human nature; it would thirst for expression, for exercise, for activity, it would respond to the summons of less competent writers when no longer preoccupied with the works of their superiors. It would be very far from truth, and very far from falsehood also, to state the proposition thus: Life is so rich and great that even its poorer embodiments and presentations would recompense an earnest scrutiny. But the mind of man is disqualified to cope with this abundance; selection is indispensable; and we use literary genius as a kind of chalk or index to designate the objects of our study. Such an assertion would not be true; but, like many other assertions that are not true, it is instructive. The establishment of relations with elevated minds will always remain among the cardinal satisfactions and benefits of literature; but an advantage and distinction of equal, if not greater, force, is found in its capacity to awaken in the reader the true and beautiful mood, the reverent and docile temper, which could educe power and interest from slighter or inferior materials, and almost makes its own preëminence superfluous.