

***DAVID CHRISTIE
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***MY CONTEMPORARIES
IN FICTION***



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My Contemporaries In Fiction

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INTRODUCTORY

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When these essays were originally printed (they appeared simultaneously in many newspapers), I expected to make some enemies. So far, I have been most agreeably disappointed in that regard; but I can affirm that they have made me many friends, and that I have had encouragement enough from fellow craftsmen, from professional critics, and from casual readers at home, in the colonies, and the United States to bolster up the courage of the most timorous man that ever held a pen. As a set-off against all this, I have received one very noble and dignified rebuke from a Contemporary in Fiction, whom the world holds in high honour, who regrets that I am not engaged in creative work—in lieu of this—and pleads that ‘authorship should be allowed the distinction of an exemption from rank and title.’ With genuine respect I venture to urge that this is an impossible aspiration, and in spite of the lofty sanction which the writer’s name must lend to his opinion, I have been unable to surrender the belief that the work done in these pages is alike honourable and useful. It is, as will be seen, in the nature of a crusade against puffery and hysteria. It is not meant to instruct the instructed, and it makes no pretence to be infallible, but it is issued in its present form in the belief that it will (in some degree) aid the average reader in the formation of just opinions on contemporary art, and in the hope that it may (in some degree) impose a check on certain interested or over-enthusiastic people.

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I.—FIRST, THE CRITICS, AND THEN A WORD ON DICKENS

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The critics of to-day are suffering from a sort of epidemic of kindness. They have accustomed themselves to the administration of praise in unmeasured doses. They are not, taking them in the mass, critics any longer, but merely professional admirers. They have ceased to be useful to the public, and are becoming dangerous to the interests of letters. In their over-friendly eyes every painstaking apprentice in the art of fiction is a master, and hysterical schoolgirls, who have spent their brief day in the acquisition of ignorance, are reviewed as if they were so many Elizabeth Barrett Brownings or George Eliots. One of the most curious and instructive things in this regard is the use which the modern critic makes of Sir Walter Scott. Sir Walter

is set up as a sort of first standard for the aspirant in the art of fiction to excel. Let the question be asked, with as much gravity as is possible: What *is* the use of a critic who gravely assures us that Mr. S. R. Crockett 'has rivalled, if not surpassed, Sir Walter'? The statement is, of course, most lamentably and ludicrously absurd, but it is made more than once, or twice, or thrice, and it is quoted and advertised. It is not Mr. Crockett's fault that he is set on this ridiculous eminence, and his name is not cited here with any grain of malice. He has his fellow-sufferers. Other gentlemen who have 'rivalled, if not surpassed, Sir Walter,' are Dr. Conan Doyle, Mr. J. M. Barrie, Mr. Ian Maclaren, and Mr. Stanley Weyman. No person whose judgment is worth a straw can read the writings of these accomplished workmen without respect and pleasure. But it is no more true that they rival Sir Walter than it is true that they are twelve feet high, or that any one of them believes in his own private mind the egregious announcement of the reviewer. The one great sufferer by this craze for setting men of middling stature side by side with Scott is our beautiful and beloved Stevenson, who, unless rescued by some judicious hand, is likely to be buried under foolish and unmeasured praises.

It would be easy to fill pages with verifications of the charge here made. Books of the last half-dozen years or so, which have already proved the ephemeral nature of their own claim, have been received with plaudits which would have been exaggerated if applied to some of our acknowledged classics. The critical declaration that 'Eric Bright-eyes' could have been written by no other Englishman of the last six hundred years than Mr. Rider

Haggard may be allowed its own monumental place in the desert of silly and hysteric judgments.

It is time, for the sake of mere common-sense, to get back to something like a real standard of excellence. It is time to say plainly that our literature is in danger of degradation, and that the mass of readers is systematically misled.

Before I go further, I will offer one word in self-excuse. I have taken this work upon my own shoulders, because I cannot see that anybody else will take it, and because it seems to me to be calling loudly to be done. My one unwillingness to undertake it lies in the fact that I have devoted my own life to the pursuit of that art the exercise of which by my contemporaries I am now about to criticise. That has an evil and ungenerous look. But, whatever the declaration may seem to be worth, I make it with sincerity and truth. I have never tasted the gall of envy in my life. I have had my share, and my full share, of the critical sugarplums. I have never, in the critics, apprehension, 'rivalled or surpassed Sir Walter,' but on many thousands of printed pages (of advertisement) it is recorded that I have 'more genius for the delineation of rustic character than any half-dozen surviving novelists put together.' I laugh when I read this, for I remember Thomas Hardy, who is my master far and far away. I am quite persuaded that my critic was genuinely pleased with the book over which he thus 'pyrotechnicated' (as poor Artemus used to say), but I think my judgment the more sane and sober of the two. I have not the faintest desire to pull down other men's flags and leave my own flag flying. And there is the first and last

intrusion of myself. I felt it necessary, and I will neither erase it nor apologise for its presence.

Side by side with the exaggerated admiration with which our professional censors greet the crowd of new-comers, it is instructive to note the contempt into which some of our old gods have fallen. The Superior Person we have always with us. He is, in his essence, a Prig; but when, as occasionally happens, his heart and intelligence ripen, he loses the characteristics which once made him a superior person. Whilst he holds his native status his special art is not to admire anything which common people find admirable. A year or two ago it became the shibboleth of his class that they couldn't read Dickens. We met suddenly a host of people who really couldn't stand Dickens. Most of them (of course) were 'the people of whom crowds are made,' owning no sort of mental furniture worth exchange or purchase. They killed the fashion of despising Dickens *as* a fashion, and the Superior Person, finding that his sorrowful inability was no longer an exclusive thing, ceased to brag about it. When a fashion in dress is popular on Hampstead Heath on Bank Holiday festivals, the people who originally set the fashion discard it, and set another. In half a generation some of our superiors, for the mere sake of originality in judgment, will be going back to the pages of that immortal master-immortal as men count literary immortality—and will begin to tell us that after all there was really something in him.

It was Mr. W. D. Howells, an American writer of distinguished ability, as times go, who set afloat the phrase that since the death of Thackeray and Dickens fiction has

become a finer art. If Mr. Howells had meant what many people supposed him to mean, the saying would have been merely impudent. He used the word 'finer' in its literal sense, and meant only that a fashion of minuteness in investigation and in style had come upon us. There is a sense in which the dissector who makes a reticulation of the muscular and nervous systems of a little finger is a 'finer' surgeon than the giant of the hospitals whose diagnosis is an inspiration, and whose knife carves unerringly to the root of disease. There is a sense in which a sculptor, carving on cherrystones likenesses of commonplace people, would be a 'finer' artist than Michael Angelo, whose custom it was to handle forms of splendour on an heroic scale of size. In that sense, and in the hands of some of its practitioners, fiction for a year or two became a finer art than it had ever been before. But the microscopist was never popular, and could never hope to be. He is dead now, and the younger men are giving us vigorous copies of Dumas, and Scott, and Edgar Allan Poe, and some of them are fusing the methods of Dickens with those of later and earlier writers. We are in for an era of broad effect again.

But a great many people, and, amongst them, some who ought to have known better, adopted the saying of Mr. Howells in a wider sense than he ever intended it to carry, and, partly as a result of this, we have arrived at a certain tacit depreciation of the greatest emotional master of fiction. There are other and more cogent reasons for the temporary obscuration of that brilliant light. It may aid our present purpose to discover what they are.

Every age has its fashions in literature as it has in dress. All the beautiful fashions in literature, at least, have been thought worthy of revival and imitation, but there has come to each in turn a moment when it has begun to pall upon the fancy. Every school before its death is fated to inspire satiety and weariness. The more overwhelming its success has been, the more complete and sweeping is the welcomed change. We know how the world thrilled and wept over Pamela and Clarissa, and we know how their particular form of pathos sated the world and died. We know what a turn enchanted castles had, and how their spell withered into nothing. We know what a triumphal progress the Sentimental Sufferer made through the world, and what a bore he came to be. It is success which kills. Success breeds imitation, and the imitators are a weariness. And it is not the genius who dies. It is only the school which arose to mimic him. Richardson is alive for everybody but the dull and stupid. Now that the world of fiction is no longer crowded with enchanted castles, we can go to live in one occasionally for a change, and enjoy ourselves. Werther is our friend again, though the school he founded was probably the most tiresome the world has seen.

Now, with the solitary exception of Sir Walter Scott, it is probable that no man ever inspired such a host of imitators as Charles Dickens. There is not a writer of fiction at this hour, in any land where fiction is a recognised trade or art, who is not, whether he knows it and owns it, or no, largely influenced by Dickens. His method has got into the atmosphere of fiction, as that of all really great writers must do, and we might as well swear to unmix our oxygen and

hydrogen as to stand clear of his influences. To stand clear of those influences you must stand apart from all modern thought and sentiment. You must have read nothing that has been written in the last sixty years, and you must have been bred on a desert island. Dickens has a living part in the life of the whole wide world. He is on a hundred thousand magisterial benches every day. There is not a hospital patient in any country who has not at this minute a right to thank God that Dickens lived. What his blessed and bountiful hand has done for the poor and oppressed, and them that had no helper, no man knows. He made charity and good feeling a religion. Millions and millions of money have flowed from the coffers of the rich for the benefit of the poor because of his books. A great part of our daily life, and a good deal of the best of it, is of his making.

No single man ever made such opportunities for himself. No single man was ever so widely and permanently useful. No single man ever sowed gentleness and mercy with so broad a sweep.

This is all true, and very far from new, but it has not been the fashion to say it lately. It is not the whole of the truth. Noble rivers have their own natural defects of swamp and mudbank. Sometimes his tides ran sluggishly, as in 'The Battle of Life,' for example, which has always seemed to me, at least, a most mawkish and unreal book. The pure stream of 'The Carol,' which washes the heart of a man, runs thin in 'The Chimes,' runs thinner in 'The Haunted Man,' and in 'The Battle of Life' is lees and mud. 'Nickleby,' again, is a young man's book, and as full of blemishes as of