ARE SCOTT, DICKENS, AND THACKERAY OBSOLETE?

CERTAIN writers in England have been asserting lately—and the public seems to have attached some weight to their opinion—that the three greatest novelists which this country has possessed during the century are already losing their popularity and that their day is virtually over. The novelists referred to are Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray, and it has been asked, Who reads them now? The question is an interesting one and has a general as well as a particular meaning, for it prompts us to consider how far the modern novel is a form of art to which even the most powerful genius is capable of imparting any permanent value.

In painting, the most vivid colors, as Sir Joshua Reynolds found, are sometimes those whose brightness fades most quickly; and there are many reasons for imagining that the same may be the case in literature. Of all forms of literature, the modern novel is that which represents life most vividly. The novelist's brush is dipped in the colors of the moment; and though he may deal with the passions of all time, he represents them as manifested under the peculiar conditions of his own. In this way the novel is the very reverse of poetry. Poetry, by means of its mere form, tends to universalize what it treats of and to lift its subject-matter above the sphere in which changes are most rapid; whereas that is the special sphere in which the novelist works. We may take as instances "Faust" and "Werther," or "Wilhelm Meister." In "Faust" the action is nominally laid in the Middle Ages, but we feel that really it is laid in no age in particular, but in all ages or in any age; and the mediæval scenes and manners and even the mediæval superstitions are universal symbols which, like the Apostles' preaching, translate themselves for each reader into his own language. But with "Werther" or "Wilhelm Meister" the case is entirely otherwise. There, though the action is laid in times comparatively recent, we are every moment made to feel that they are different times from ours, and that the actors live in a world disturbed by different interests. Our wonder, even our amusement, is far greater than our sympathy when we think of Werther and Char-

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lotte sucking an orange at a tea-party; and Meister's concern in the fortunes of the German stage or his desire to escape through the stage from the life of a German *bourgeois* must have lost even for German readers most of their original meaning. And of novels generally, as contrasted with poetry, it may be easily imagined that the same thing holds good. As contrasted with poetry, the material of which they are constructed is perishable—is essentially perishable. The very things that make them real to our half-century are the very things that will make them seem unreal to another.

It is easy, I say, to imagine that this is a general, even a necessary truth. But when we turn from imagination to facts do we find it to be so actually? It is true in some instances; but is it true in all? In especial is it true of those British novelists to whom reference has just been made? As I have said, it has recently been asked, Who reads them now? To that question what is the true answer? The implied answer, of course, is that no one reads them or that their readers are getting yearly fewer. Now, with regard to Thackeray this may be the case or it may not be. I will speak about him presently, but with regard to Scott and Dickens there is no hesitation necessary. It may be said at once, and it may be said flatly, that it is not the case. They are not only still read by many people, but they are read by more people to-day than they ever were before. This fact is substantiated by the copies of their works that are sold; indeed, it stares us in the face at every railway book-store. Scott and Dickens, if measured by the number of their readers, are growing in popularity, not declining. How then, it may be asked, could the contrary opinion have arisen? It has arisen probably from the persons who gave expression to it having trusted to impressions derived from their own social observation; but in matters like this nothing can be more misleading.

The social observation even of those who have seen much of the world is limited, and is generally limited in more than one way. It is not limited only to certain classes, or certain sections of certain classes, but also to persons of the observer's own age or pursuits. It is, further, very often inaccurate. No doubt circles exist—and indeed I think it is probable that those composing them may consider themselves highly cultivated—in which Scott and Dickens are entirely unread and despised. Again, many of those who read them read them early in life, and the nature of their studies escapes older observers; while the very fact of a book's having been familiar to most

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people for half their lifetime is sufficient to prevent its being a preferred subject of conversation. When one lady asks another what she has been reading lately, she means what new trash fresh from the circulating library; and her friend would never, although it might be perfectly true, think of saying by way of answer, "Such a delightful book—'Guy Mannering.'" It is, therefore, very easy to see how certain persons, trusting merely to observation, may have derived the impression that Scott and Dickens are read no longer. They may have lived principally among those who actually do not read them; or they may have judged merely from contemporaries who read them long ago; or they may have thought them not read merely because they are not daily talked about. Anyhow, the fact remains that these persons are wrong. The great writers in question are read as much as and even more than ever. The only point there can be any doubt about is, By whom are they read?

To this question no complete answer can be given. Publishers can tell how many copies are sold, but they cannot tell us who are the ultimate buyers. That there is a demand for editions so cheap as to necessitate indifferent print and paper shows them to be read by multitudes who are at all events comparatively poor; while expensive editions prove the same thing as to the rich: but if we wish to arrive at any more detailed conclusions we shall have to fall back on the internal probabilities of the case, or on that personal observation which, as has just been said, must be so limited. By the internal probabilities of the case I mean this: I mean the degree to which the works of these two writers seem severally calculated by their style, subject, and tone to appeal to the various classes which make up the reading public. Judging of the matter in this way, my impression is that Scott makes a wider appeal than Dickens. Scott, in his own country certainly, is enjoyed by the poorest peasants; and there is little in his tone or his general treatment of life which might not be appreciated by the humblest classes quite as readily as by the highest.

But with Dickens I venture to think that this is not so. The humbler classes occupy on his canvas a far larger space than they do on that of Scott; but the aspect of these classes, which Dickens excels in describing, is not the aspect which these classes themselves see. I once, for instance, had a servant who by his Cockney humor and shrewdness often reminded me of Sam Weller or Mark Tapley. On one occasion when he was ill I bought him a "Martin Chuzzlewit" with pictures which called attention to the most amusing parts of the

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text. The man enjoyed the pictures, but though he was fond of reading, he found in the text nothing that made him even smile. And I might have expected this. The whole point of more than half of Dickens' writing depends on the fact that the manners and ways of thinking he describes differ from the manners and ways of thinking of those to whom he describes them. I conceive, therefore, with regard to these two writers, the probable truth to be that while there is no class which may not enjoy Scott, there must be a large class which is unable to enjoy Dickens. But in any case the public that still enjoys them both is as large and as national a public as ever enjoyed any author. To such general observations I have nothing further to add except a few results of my own personal observation, which the reader must take for what they are worth.

I do not speak of any sets or circles which are specially literary. What such sets read would be no general test. I speak merely of what is commonly meant by society—the fashionable word in its broader as well as its narrower sense—and I should certainly say that, so far as my own observation can inform me, no two writers are to this curiously composite body more universally familiar at this moment than Scott and Dickens. The old have read them; the young are reading them; nor need any one doubt the fact because they are not discussed like novelties. With regard to Dickens, for instance, I was lately at a country house where a party was staying composed of young guardsmen and young ladies whom the young guardsmen danced with at London balls. Literature of any kind was rarely mentioned by any of them; but some joke was made by some one—very good of its kind—consisting of an allusion to Dickens and intelligible only by a knowledge of him; and there was not a person present who did not understand and laugh at it. With regard to Scott, let any one visit in Scotland at the houses where in the autumn the London world is to be encountered. There is hardly a district in that country which is not associated with Scott and which does not naturally give some occasion to allude to him. A visitor at such houses will rarely be thrown with people to whom such allusions are not perfectly familiar, and who do not find their pleasure in the most romantic scenery heightened from being able to connect it with some incident in the Waverley novels.

But it seems to me needless to insist on the fact further that Scott and Dickens as writers are still in England as much alive as they ever were. Therefore, taking the fact for granted, we will proceed to

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inquire into the reason of it. If there is any truth in the observations I made at starting, it is a fact which at first sight is curious; for if ever there were writers who—to return to my original metaphor—painted their pictures with brushes dipped in the colors of the moment, of their own age, and of particular and peculiar localities, such were the colors employed by Scott and Dickens. How is it, then, that they still retain their freshness when even Goethe as a novelist from employing similar colors has lost so much of his? I believe the answer to be as follows: Just as it has been said that an original writer creates the taste by which he is to be appreciated, so certain novelists in describing their own times perpetuate the social atmosphere in which they are to be understood. They make each of their novels carry with it the light by which it was written. But other novelists do not do this, and their novels, when the circumstances under which they were written pass away from them, become dim like an unlit railway carriage when it moves out of a lighted station. Thus Scott or Dickens, when they told a story, not only told a story but surrounded it with a period and a locality. It is not only Pecksniff and Pickwick that Dickens has made immortal, but the England in which they lived. While as for "Werther" and "Wilhelm Meister," the characters indeed remain, their surroundings have disappeared—the manners of their localities, the problems of their age. We may find these indeed in history, but we do not find them in Goethe's novels.

Again, there are certain novelists—and Goethe was one of them—that deal with facts of their own times which, even if they could be perpetuated, would soon cease to be interesting; though many of them are facts which to the writer and his contemporaries may seem, and indeed may be, of the utmost moment. Such are any passing developments of religious, scientific, or social theories, or any movements based on them. A novel, for instance, like "Robert Elsmere" derives its whole interest from dealing with facts like these. The advance of biblical criticism or a wider knowledge of its results will turn this successful book into nothing but a protracted platitude. Indeed, Mrs. Ward and novelists like her may be said, in proportion as they succeed in their presumed object, not to create the taste by which they are to be appreciated, but to destroy it; and we may add, to put the matter in a more general way, that in proportion as any novel seems to have a special message to the age in which it is written, it is likely to have no message at all to any other. Now, of Scott it

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may be said without reservation, and of Dickens with few reservations, that the special message is in their works entirely absent. They give us life. They do not give us views of life, and this largely accounts for the absence in them of what is obsolete.

The above explanations, however, explain half of the matter only. They explain only why these writers have not ceased to be popular; they do not explain why they *are* popular. The answer to that is to be found in their extraordinary genius—extraordinary not in its greatness only, but in the area to which it was applied: and I continue to couple their names and speak of them both together because the point in which they both most differ from other novelists happens to be a point in which they singularly resemble one another. They are each of them national, in a sense and in a degree in which no other novelists or imaginative writers of any kind have been national. Scott has stamped his genius on an entire country; Dickens has stamped his (whether for good or evil) on an entire language.

Let us consider Scott's case first. It may safely be said that Scott is to his own country what no other writer ever has been to any country. Shakespeare no doubt may have been a greater genius than he, but Scott has done for Scotland what Shakespeare never did for England. Scotland from one end to the other is haunted with Scott's genius. The imaginary events of his novels have there almost taken the place of the actual events of history; and it is his novels rather than history that make it seem an historical country. A country small, remote, and till lately poor, with a population which recently was scarcely half that of contemporary London, and with manners and modes of thought peculiar in their severe provincialism—Scott has made it a country familiar to two hemispheres. Shakespeare may be said to go out to meet the imagination of strange readers; Scott compels the imagination of his readers to come to him among his own hills. Who when he visits Windsor thinks of Sir John Falstaff? Who when he visits Wigtonshire does not think of Guy Mannering? The Highland mountains are seen through an air enchanted and bewitched by Scott. Half the traffic on the Highland railway, if not the railway itself, is due to him; and but for him Inverness would probably be still an obscure village. One of the principal railway routes from London to Edinburgh is called by the name of one of his imaginary characters; and the historical name of a place in Lanarkshire has been cancelled and been replaced by the one which he gave in "Old Mortality." Of Hamlet it has been said that

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he is not *a* man but that he is man. Of Scott's characters it may be said that they are not men and women only, but a nation, and a nation in its own home. To him, in connection with Scotland, may be applied in literal truth some verses which I remember an excitable Oxford undergraduate years ago wrote about Mazzini and Italy:

> "His soul is mixed with the air which fills
> Her streets, and haunts her valleys and breathes free
> Upon the sacred heights of all her hills."

In short, Scott's novels are not fragments of life or pictures of life. They are life itself, clothed and corporeal with all its transitory and local realities; and to read these novels is less a study than an experience, and it is also an experience that is as vivid now as ever; for just as they have the breadth of a nation so have they the vitality of a nation.

And now let us turn to Dickens. I have said he resembles Scott in being, like Scott, national; but he was national in a different manner. He has not made England, as Scott made Scotland, his own topographically or historically. Scott saw the present as the result of the historical past, and in this way he gave it a new dimension. Dickens had no sense of the historical past at all, and presumably little knowledge of it; and this is probably the reason why, with the exception of London, few of the localities in which the action of his books lies have, as described by him, any strong local individuality. They are like England as he knew it, but not specially like any special parts of England. Every one sees how appropriately the name of "Waverley Route" is given to one of the railway routes in Edinburgh; but though some of the best-known incidents in "Pickwick" happened at Bath and Ipswich, who would think of calling a railway to either town the "Pickwick Route"? The incidents in question might have happened just as well at Cheltenham or at Exeter. Any old coaching inn recalls Dickens to us quite as much as the celebrated "Great White Horse." Scott's characters move in a concrete Scotland; those of Dickens move in an abstract England. Whereas Scott's scenes are individual, those of Dickens are representative; but they are not for that reason any the less truthful. They give us England as broadly and as nationally as Scott gives us Scotland. They reach the same result, but by another artistic method.

A deeper difference between the two writers is this—that the various aspects of life appeal to each in different degrees. What a mountain or an old castle was to Scott, a stage-coach or a lawyer's office

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was to Dickens. What the one accepted as a matter of course was to the other an object of ever fresh appreciation. Scott accepted the present; what he was consciously fascinated by was the past. With Dickens the case was the exact reverse of this. He accepted the past; it was the present by which he was consciously fascinated; and the past had no meaning for him except as connected with it. An old building for him was not like a dead man, but like an old man—an old man making faces either grotesque or sinister. For him everything was alive with the life of his own day. Houses, crooked courts, four-post bedsteads, cabs, portmanteaus, chimney-pots, and all inanimate objects winked at him, laughed with him, and spoke to him in the vernacular of the streets, and were forever saying to him something fresh and pungent. He had all the familiarity with the life around him that could be produced by the most close acquaintance with it; and yet he was always watching it with the surprise and expectant freshness which, as a rule, belong only to those to whom it is still a novelty. And this vision of his he communicated to his readers. He made them see not what they had not seen before, but what they had not noticed before. He made them conscious of their own unconscious observations. His genius acted on the surface of English life as spilt water acts on the surface of unpolished marble. It suddenly made visible all its colors and veinings; and in this way he may be said to have revealed England to itself: and he still does so.

It is true that this general statement must be made with one reservation. One part of English life was entirely beyond his grasp. He knew nothing of the highest class. He had no true knowledge even of the upper ranks of the middle class. His lords, his baronets, his majors, his ladies and gentlemen generally are not even like enough to reality to be called caricatures. But if we accept these classes and speak only of the bulk of the nation, no writer ever knew the English nation and represented the English nation so thoroughly and comprehensively as Dickens. His style is full of the faults of a man imperfectly educated. Errors of taste abound in it, and much of his sentiment is mawkish, or constrained, or false; and yet, in spite of this, not only do his writings embody the shrewdest, the truest, the widest, and the most various observations of the life around him, but they show him to be, in a certain sense, one of the greatest of English poets. In saying this I am making no allusion to any passages which sentimental admirers of him may consider poetical, or which he probably thought poetical himself. I am alluding to the manner in which,

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throughout his works, he not only presents what are commonly called the facts of life, but actually gives us that elusive atmosphere which in life surrounds these facts and imparts to them those changing aspects by which in life we know them; an atmosphere impregnated with wandering thoughts and sentiments and volatile associations—an element whch would seem to defy description. This Dickens has described. It penetrates his works and permeates them.

One example may be given, a single touch. He is describing some lawyer's office with dim, dusty windows, and among other details he notes this: that there was on the floor an enormous faded stain, "as if some by-gone clerk had cut his throat there and had bled ink." The whole past and present of the place is suggested in these few words, and what he felt and described in a lawyer's office he felt and described in nearly every scene he dealt with. He felt and he seized its human and, above all, its national meaning. He did this even in cases where it might be thought he would have failed to do so. I said he knew nothing of the highest upper classes; but in a certain way he understood their life as a factor in the life of the country, through certain of their surroundings. He knew the meaning and the sentiment of old English parks, of lodges, and gray gate-posts, damp and mottled with lichens. He knew the spirit which haunted the whispering avenue and hung above the twisted chimney-stacks and mullioned window of the hall; but his comprehension stopped at the front door. It was never at home inside. With this reservation, Dickens is England; and if he could not describe what the upper class see among themselves, he describes what they see whenever they go out of doors. To move out of the seclusion of polite life in England is to walk with Dickens. It is so still, as it was in his own days; and if any proof is needed in addition to those I have already mentioned, it may be found in the English language as spoken at this moment. Dickens' characters exist not in his books only. They have walked out of his books and taken their places among living people. Their looks and manners are social and not literary facts; their jokes and phrases are the common property of the nation. Of one other novelist only can this be said, and that novelist is Scott.

And now let us turn to Thackeray. Do his books still retain their vitality as those of Scott and Dickens do? What their sale may be now, as compared with what it was during the author's lifetime, I am not able to say. Certainly the eye is not constantly confronted with new editions of him as it is with new editions of Scott and Dickens.

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That fact, however, does not tell us much; for never at any time can he have appealed to a public so large as they did. To say this is to say nothing in derogation of his genius. The number of readers a writer has is not necessarily any indication of his greatness, or even of his influence. If it were, the author of "Robert Elsmere" or "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab" would be incomparably greater than Darwin or Mr. Herbert Spencer. Thackeray's readers were and are limited by the limitations of his subjects, by nothing else. He did much that Scott did not attempt and that Dickens could not ever have conceived; but for every million that can understand Scott and Dickens there are probably only a thousand that can understand Thackeray. His minute observation of the upper classes of his day is lost on persons to whom those classes are not familiar, partly because such persons do not recognize what he is dealing with, and partly because they are not interested in the questions with which he is most preoccupied. Indeed, of all great novelists Thackeray is the narrowest, not because the range of his vision is confined to the upper classes, for these viewed comprehensively form a complete microcosm and in many ways exhibit the problems and possibilities of life better than any other class; but because, accepting the upper classes as the world, he views them from one position only, and his view of them is extremely partial. Only a few of his characters he knows from the inside; all the rest he knows from the outside only. Men who were clients of the world or its victims, who were struggling with it or hostile to it—these men Thackeray knew from the inside. But the world itself, which for him meant the aristocratic class as a body—he was familiar with its aspect, but he never understood its spirit. Major Pendennis and his nephew, Rawdon Crawley, George Osborne, and Colonel Newcome—he knew these as if each of them were himself. Lord Steyne, Lord Bareacres, and Sir Pitt Crawley he knew merely as a vigilant witness. Hence the narrowness of his view as compared to Scott and Dickens. Hence he seems such a dwarf when placed beside them. And his narrowness of view finds another expression of itself in the fewness of his types of character. It has been well said, for instance, that he could draw but two women—the bad and the good, Becky Sharp being the prototype of the one and Amelia Sedley of the other.

All this, however, is mentioned merely to show why Thackeray's appeal to the world must have always been comparatively limited, and limited not only *to* the upper classes, but *among* them. Whether

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in process of time the number of his readers is diminishing, I repeat I am unable to say. A more important question is whether the interest with which he is read now is as fresh and vital as that with which he was read originally. I should say it was not; and I should say so for this reason, that as compared with Scott and Dickens he lacked the qualities by which the vitality of his work could be perpetuated. He lacked their extraordinary breadth and their extraordinary variety; he lacked the qualities that made them so peculiarly and so comprehensively national. They each gave us a nation—a nation which still lives; Thackeray gave us a fragment of a generation, which already is almost past. It is true that the social life described by Scott and Dickens strikes us as in some respects more remote from that of the present than the social life described by Thackeray; but Scott and Dickens have an art on which I have already commented. They surround their characters with the atmosphere in which they lived. That atmosphere is in the books themselves; it is not only in the reader's experience. And as for Pickwick, we are at once in the England of stage-coaches. Nothing seems strange; nothing old-fashioned. We are in a perennial present. But with Thackeray the case is quite different. His characters live, but they seem to live in a vanished or vanishing world. The bachelor haunts, for instance, of his heroes, such as "the Old Slaughters," are to this generation mere shadows of unremembered names. The haunts of Dickens' heroes, though they belong to the past also, are as distinct and vivid to us as they were to those who frequented them.

W. H. Mallock.

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BRANDY AND SOCIALISM: THE GOTHENBURG PLAN.

THE phrase "Brandy and Socialism" accurately expresses both the fact and the purpose of the Gothenburg system of controlling the sale of spirits in Sweden and Norway. The word brandy—a strong liquor distilled from corn or potatoes—represents that to which this legislation chiefly applies. The method of selling is socialistic in the strict sense of allowing no private person to make profit for himself out of the liquor sales. The profits go straight to the community for public uses.

The announcement has been made that a bill will be brought in at the next Parliament to try this system in England. One of the leading dignitaries of the church, the Bishop of Chester, sent to the "Times," August 20, a letter in which he boldly says that the time has come for a trial of this method. In "prohibition" merely he sees no hope of any widely efficient and practical dealing with the question. The large influence of this bishop and his long and intelligent interest in the "drink question" have given to the issue its unusual prominence. Several vigorous efforts have been already made in England to arouse general interest in this Swedish plan. Investigations were made into its workings before the report of the House of Lords in 1879 appeared. The whole spirit of this report is strikingly like that which now comes from Dr. Jayne, the Bishop of Chester. Several years earlier Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, whose practical genius for successful municipal reforms is believed to be unmatched in England, had carefully studied this Swedish plan. His conversion was complete and he determined to introduce its essential features into Birmingham. The cry "Too much centralization" was raised against it. That it was "socialistic" in its nature was also felt to be a danger. Since Mr. Chamberlain's first interest in this scheme the English cities have had so many and such successful experiences in controlling "natural monopolies" of various sorts that the word "socialistic" has lost its terrors. But of even greater importance is the rapid rise of the County Council, which offers such security for the exercise of local rights and influences that the cry of "centralization" also has

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