

## NOVELISTS AND NOVEL READING

NOVELISTS often complain that people speak with contempt of novel reading. The justice of their complaint depends upon what they mean. If they mean that their art is despised, they could not possibly be more wrong than they are. The lyric and the novel have for the last fifty years or more superseded all other literary forms. Novels long ago attained such a position that a man like Landor, who lived habitually with the literatures to which they are unknown, and knew the world's great epics, especially Homer and Milton, almost by heart, rejoiced in them as 'the least tiresome kind of epics.' Sixty or seventy years ago it might still be possible to think that the writer of Grote's *History of Greece* was a higher kind of man of letters than the authors of *Vanity Fair* and *Dombey and Son*, which were written about the same time. But that is quite impossible now. Everyone saw that Stevenson belonged to a higher order of the literary hierarchy than, say, Bagehot or Lecky; as everyone sees that Mr. Hardy and Mr. Conrad belong to a higher order than even such highly-honored veterans of history, philosophy, or criticism as Lord Morley, Sir George Trevelyan, and Mr. Saintsbury. Why? For the very simple reason that the first two have not only claimed the right of creation, but have shown themselves possessed of the powers which justify the claim; while the last three have never so much as claimed the right or pretended to the powers. The novelist is now seen to rank with the poet. Scott did for his age just what Homer did for the early Greeks. Anatole France does for the French the work of Aristophanes, and

Mr. Hardy for us something like the work of Euripides. There may be, indeed there are, many deductions and qualifications to be made both from the general principle and from these particular parallels. But the broad truth remains. The re-creation of the world by means of the imagination, that giving of form to the chaos of life, which is the task of the finest art and of the rarest qualities in the mind of man, is now divided between the poet and the novelist, and is in fact more frequently though never so perfectly accomplished by the latter.

This new position of the novel may be measured by the change which has come over the official, or more or less *Almanack de Gotha*, status of the novelist. Such things always follow a generation or so behind the movements of intelligent opinion. They are not to be blamed for that. It is the business of intelligence to do pioneer work, which often gets on to a wrong track. Official bodies which commit whole orders or nations, wisely follow only when the track has proved itself able to lead somewhere. But then they do follow. So we see to-day. Seventy years ago how many novelists were there elected, as novelists, to the French Academy? To-day any novelist of real imaginative power, any man who can both create and write, is almost certain of his place there, in spite of the fact that elections to the Academy are not always made on purely literary considerations. Seventy years ago Grote would have been thought a far fitter president for the London Library or the Society of Authors than Dickens or Thackeray. To-day it is Thomas Hardy whom the Society of Authors prefers above all

others for its president, and yesterday George Meredith was among the three vice-presidents of the London Library. The most distinguished of all honors, the Order of Merit, has been given to three novelists, and not, as yet, to a single poet, for it seems certain that it was as novelists and not as poets that Meredith and Mr. Hardy were named to the Order; and Henry James wrote no poetry. The National Gallery is at this moment exhibiting a portrait of Henry James presented to the writer by a body of subscribers who were moved as much by admiration of the artist as by love of the man; while it was accepted from him by the nation as the portrait of one whose high place among English men of letters is unquestioned and unquestionable. Has that ever happened before in the case of a novelist's portrait, and in his lifetime? For these arrangements were made before Henry James's death, and before he became a British subject. Nor was he ever a popular figure, either as writer or as man. The tribute was paid to him by the intellectuals with the respectful acquiescence of the great public to whom the things which interested him and the way in which he expressed his interest were alike unintelligible. It was a public recognition that a great novelist, like a great poet, is a man to be honored even by those who themselves cannot read him.

Here, then, is the novelist definitely emerged from the status of intruder, *parvenu*, or poor relation in the world of letters: admitted indeed as by right, on equal or almost equal terms, into the circle of its very highest and noblest family. But it is just there that the difficulty comes in. That society makes certain demands upon those who enter it. Any attempt to enter it without a wedding garment exposes the intruder not only to rejection but to punishment, which may easily involve weep-

ing and gnashing of teeth. *Mediocribus esse poetis* must be a law for novelists as well as for poets directly they claim to share the poet's throne. And then they must come in the right spirit. A poet who turns out poetry for the market as a tradesman turns out his wares, a poet who looks at the spectacle of life with the eye of a newspaper reporter always seeing without ever perceiving, is not merely despised; he is hated for profaning the name and fellowship of the poets. So now it must be with the novelists. Nobody despises tradesmen or newspaper reporters, and if novelists had never chosen to be anything more nobody would have despised novelists. But after *The Heart of Midlothian* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Youth*, after *La Vieille Fille* and *Un Cœur Simple*, after *A Sportsman's Sketches* and *Anna Karenina* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, there can be no going back. To-day a novelist can no longer be a journalist or a tradesman with impunity.

That is one of the difficulties which inevitably follow from an art coming of age and having to be taken seriously. To take a humble illustration, it is like the difference between fifty years ago and to-day in the matter of playing the piano. Nobody took music seriously then, and as a result every young lady who had passed beyond her scales would be asked to perform to her mother's friends, and did so without either feeling or appearing contemptible. Now that is impossible. The musical education of the country, though backward enough, as a glance at any music-seller's windows will show, has at last advanced so far as to forbid our forcing every girl to learn to sing and play, irrespective of any question of her possessing a voice or an ear, and to make us require a certain standard before those who may ultimately be able to perform are invited or allowed to do

so in public. In the same way the art of the novelist has grown up, and we have been educated to take it seriously and can no longer endure with patience the punctual arrival every three months of another of Mr. A.'s 'machines' or another of Miss B.'s fashion books.

There lies one cause of the contempt of novels — in the antithesis between the greatness of the possibilities of the art as revealed by its masters and the vulgarity, triviality, and commercialism of the bulk of its practitioners. The 'mediocre' poets, who annoy us also, are neither so numerous nor so vulgar; and the public gives them no chance of being so commercial. That is where their art helps even them: its nobility and its difficulty almost forbid vulgarity, and put serious obstacles in the way of commercialism. It is the advantage of sculpture as compared with painting. The sculptor has a more difficult art and much less chance of popularity. The result is that there are fifty bad painters for one bad sculptor. The novelist and the painter find their art too easy. Applause of a kind, to say nothing of profit, can be bought in it at too cheap a rate; and the incompetent come in crowds to obtain it. To write a fourth-rate novel is a kind of trick requiring the fewest and lowest intellectual attainments, and in consequence winning and deserving no more respect than is paid to a juggler. Each has learned to perform a trick which we cannot ourselves perform and do not desire to — that is all. It may, or may not, amuse us a little for ten minutes or a few hours. But even if it does, the performer, who is a mere tradesman selling his goods, has no claim to the respect and gratitude which are instantly given to the artist and to him alone.

Nor do such performances bring with them any indirect honor. It is prob-

ably, not difficult to learn to drive a plough or make a coat, and both occupations are commonly pursued solely for the reward they earn. But even the less interesting of the two is ancient and useful, and wins the respect that fairly belongs to ancientry and utility; while the other is, in addition, one of the most beautiful actions which man has ever been seen to perform. But inferior novel writing is neither an ancient nor a beautiful occupation, and scarcely at all a useful one. And of all kinds of writing it gives the least promise that the writer will prove an interesting man or woman. As a photographer who lives by the daily and mechanical reproduction of dull faces which mean nothing to him is almost inevitably a dull man, so with the journeyman novelist. He lives his life with his commonplace echoes of the obvious as the photographer lives with his meaningless photographs; and he is no more likely than the photographer to have anything in him to interest other people. That is where other writers, of no high pretensions, get an advantage over him. The man who makes an edition of Virgil or a short history of France, or writes a book about bee-keeping or a treatise on the poor law, is by no means certain to be good company. But he has at least the first qualification for it. For he has himself either lived in the best society, or been occupied in doing interesting or useful things, or in studying the way in which they are done. It is at least as likely to be due to our stupidity as to his if we fail to get anything interesting out of him about his bees or his poor men; and there is almost sure to be an advantage in having lived for years with such a man as Virgil or with the great names and great events which alone keep their heads above the flood of oblivion in a thousand years of history. The society kept by the journeyman novel-

ist and photographer profits by no such process of selection and contains no such promise. Then there is another thing, more or less akin to this. The novelist, as has been suggested, is exposed to contempt by the ease of his art, if he be content to take it at its lowest. But he also suffers by a difficulty inherent in it, at least for those who take their imagination at all seriously. The historian, the biographer, the writer of memoirs, the critic, has so much given to him. The novelist has nothing. When he begins to talk of Becky or Bathsheba we care nothing for either. We do not believe in them unless he can make us believe; we do not mind whether they are happy or miserable, live or die, unless he can compel us to do so. That is why indifferent novels are to some of us exactly the most tedious reading in the world. We find more pleasure in a treatise on banking, and far more in a book of Euclid. These at least exercise the mind in a world of truth and provide it with useful information. Any intelligent man, however little concerned in finance, would, on the whole, rather understand it than not. But no intelligent man feels any similar *a priori* interest in the doings of Mr. A. and Miss B., who, as his intelligence coldly tells him, never so much as existed, and, if they had, would have for him neither importance nor interest. Only the imagination can silence that cold intelligence, and the imagination cannot be set working except by real power. Consequently, to those who demand that a book should interest either the intellect or the imagination, if it cannot interest both, no reading can be so tedious as one which records the empty doings of Mr. Brown, who never comes alive, and his ultimate marriage with Miss Robinson, who was nothing at all in the first chapter and is only a stuffed and clothed wax figure in the last.

Can anybody read *The Black Arrow* after he has grown up? Can anybody stop before the last page of *Kidnapped*? There is the contrast in a single author. But this advantage which the novelist has to earn, the historian, the critic, the writer of memoirs has given to him by the nature of things. We do not want to hear about David Balfour and Alan Breck till Stevenson makes us. We want to hear about famous events and great men because, being men, we are in love both with truth and with greatness. The dullest man on earth who personally knew Shakespeare or Napoleon, or even men who are dwarfs beside these, has no need to ask our ears; he has them without asking. *Virgilium vidi tantum* is his sufficient credential; 'did you once see Shelley plain?' our inevitable attitude toward him. Edward Phillips was not an interesting man, and the treadmill would very likely be as pleasant an occupation as reading a novel of his if he had written one; but — he was Milton's nephew and knew him well. He is, therefore, sure of his audience before he begins. Eckermann was apparently rather a stupid man; but because he often talked to Goethe he was able to write one of the most interesting books in existence. So a stupid man who was in the Black Hole of Calcutta, or with Wolfe on the Heights of Abraham, or was a spectator of August 10th or 10th Thermidor or 19th Brumaire, or lived and took notes at the Court of Louis XIV or in the English Parliament in the days of Chatham or Burke, is sure of our attention beforehand. He may and often does throw it away after a while; but the point is that he starts with it and the novelist starts without it. And this is true not merely of first-hand reporters, but of students and critics. Anybody who writes about Rome, whether Republic, Empire, or Church; anybody who writes about

Greek sculpture or English poetry or Chinese porcelain; anybody who writes about religion or biology, gardening or chess, has his interest ready-made for him in the minds of his public. The novelist has nothing but what he can himself create.

There, then, is his difficulty and his glory. He has chosen to be a creator and not a compiler. He has chosen to practise an art in which, if he cannot create, he is less interesting and less respectable than a compiler. That is why men of education and intelligence feel the contempt which they certainly do feel for the mass of novelists. 'This fellow has not got the knowledge or the mind to tell me anything I want to hear; and he has not got the power which would force me to listen to whatever he wanted to say.' So they feel, consciously or unconsciously, even of the majority of the novelists who circulate in the Libraries. They cannot re-

spect or desire the acquaintance either of the men or of their works. Whether to meet or to read they prefer even the second-rate historian or critic or man of science. But the novelist's revenge, if he can take it, is glorious. If he or she can write *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Victory*, we all to-day (though not when *Pride and Prejudice* was written) bow down and worship at once. The second-rate or even first-rate critics and historians retire into the background; we salute with gratitude, with wonder, the strangely gifted being by whose magic touch the old clay of humanity is quickened to a new birth of life. Life and newness, they are the things. 'If the Lord should make a new thing,' said Moses; but it was a newness of death of which he was speaking. The only man who shares that divine privilege of making new things is the artist: and his creations are, or should be, always of new life.

The Times

## ECONOMICS, TRADE, AND FINANCE

### A FRANK EXPLANATION OF BRITISH COMMERCIAL POLICY

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So much misconception appears to prevail in some quarters over the state of British Trade and British Trade policy, that perhaps a few observations on the subject will not be out of place. And to this end it is necessary to grasp the real nature of what has happened in the war as the only means of understanding the present situation.

Industrially, the decrease in productiveness owing to the war, of the industries of the United Kingdom for export, may be measured by the fact that the total estimated weight of our exports in 1917 was only 44,742,000 tons, or 48 per cent of our exports in 1913. Commercially, however, our loss of markets has been very much greater than would be indicated by this figure. Of our total exports by weight in 1917, about one half were to France, and nearly the whole of this consisted of coal and war material. Our exports by weight, of principal articles to Italy, had declined by 53 per cent in comparison with 1913; to Argentine, Brazil, and Chile by 90 per cent, 87 per cent, and 76 per cent, respectively; to China and Japan by 76 per cent and 83 per cent respectively; to British India by 51 per cent; to Australia, New Zealand, and Canada by 73 per cent, 80 per cent, and 49 per cent, respectively. In the South American, Far Eastern, and British Overseas Markets which we have thus lost we have been largely replaced by

other nations and notably by the United States and Japan.

Financially, however, our position appears to be even more serious. Of the total declared value of our exports in 1917 — £527,080,000 — considerably more than half — £271,498,000 — represents exports to our Allies, and the greater part, if not practically the whole of this amount has been financed by the British Government itself through loans, the repayment of which is in many cases problematical, and in some cases, such as Russia, may constitute a total loss. Against a national purchasing power thus reduced have to be set imports during 1917 which, excluding government imports, except food, for the first six months of the year amounted to £1,065,256,407. It is as a result of the situation thus created that we have had in addition to our great funded debts in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, to raise loans at call or at short periods in other countries amounting to-day to between £300,000,000 and £400,000,000, the repayment of which will be our most pressing obligation at the end of the war. The serious nature of these obligations, which have been largely incurred in the interests of our allies and in furtherance of the blockade, is emphasized by the warning against expenditure in neutral countries issued to the American public by Mr. Warburg on his retirement from the Federal Reserve Board.

As regards shipping, the losses of our merchant marine, on which the whole structure of British commerce has depended, and the withdrawal of, we may justly say, the whole of the ocean shipping on the United Kingdom