

The Artstruck Englishman

Men of Letters, by Dixon Scott. With an introduction by Max Beerbohm. London: Hodder & Stoughton. 6s. Net.

TO an Irishman there is always something indecent in the way an Englishman takes to art, when he does take to it. He worships it; exalts its artifices above its inspirations; makes Gods of its frail and ridiculous human instruments; pontificates and persecutes in its name; and ends in delirium and drunkenness, which seem to him the raptures of a saint's vigil. Swinburne's article on Victor Hugo in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is quite a mild example, though it repeats the word "deathless" as often as a Jingo war editor repeats the word "unflinching." The idolatry of the Bible, which has played such a curious part in British history, is really a worship of literary art: no other nation speaks of "the Book of Books" as if the phrase were in the Athanasian Creed, just as no other nation stands up in the concert room when the Hallelujah chorus is sung. There are moments when a sober man wants to shake the idolator and talk to him like a Dutch uncle, or like Lady Macbeth when she said to her blithering ghostridden spouse, "When all's said, you look but on a stool."

I am myself a literary artist, and have made larger claims for literature—or at any rate put them forward more explicitly—than any writer of my generation as far as I know, claiming a continuous inspiration for modern literature of precisely the same character as that conceded to the ancient Hebrew scriptures, and maintaining that the man of letters, when he is more than a mere confectioner, is a prophet or nothing. But to listen for a writer's message, even when the fellow is a fool, is one thing: to worship his tools and his tricks, his pose and his style, is an abomination. Admire them by all means just as you admire the craft of the masons and the carpenters and sculptors who built your cathedral; but don't go inside and sing *Te Deums* to them.

Dixon Scott was an exceedingly clever young man, with a most remarkable specific literary talent. Reading his criticisms is like watching revolver practice by a crack shot: the explosiveness of the style and the swiftness of the devastation hide the monotony of the mood and method. His longest and most deeply felt effort was an essay on William Morris: his most elaborated, an essay on me. When it first appeared in *The Bookman*, I read it with the chuckle of the old hand whose professional tricks have landed a young one in a transport of innocent enthusiasm. But I was finally shocked by his preposterous reversal of the natural relative importance of manner and matter. He quoted a long sentence of mine, which derived a certain cumulative intensity from the fact that it was an indictment of civilization, as a specimen of style, and then, with an amazingly callous indifference to the fact that he, like the rest of us, was guilty on all its counts, simply asked, with eager curiosity, and a joyous sense of being the very man to answer the question, "Now, what pose is this?" It was very much as if I had told him the house was on fire, and he had said, "How admirably monosyllabic!" and left the nursery stairs burning unheeded. My impulse was to exclaim, "Do you suppose, you conceited young whelp, that I have taken all that trouble, and developed all that literary craft, to gratify your appetite for style? Get up at once and fetch a bucket of water; or at least raise an alarm, unless you wish me to take you by the scruff of the neck and make you do it. You call yourself a critic: you are a mere Fancier."

TIFFANY & Co.

PEARLS
OF VARIOUS SIZES

FIFTH AVENUE AND 37TH STREET
NEW YORK

This, I think, is what, in Touchstone's phrase, obliges me to disable Scott's judgment. It comes out extravagantly in his essay on Morris, which is a long and sincerely felt protest against the author of *The Defence of Guinevere* maturing into the author of *Sigurd*, of *A Dream of John Ball*, and of *News from Nowhere*. It is like a man complaining that his wife does not remain a girl: a sort of *lèse humanité* against which human honor revolts. The excuse is, of course, the writer's youth.

That maturity involves quite poignant losses to set against its consummations is only too true. Mozart's *Abduction* from the Seraglio is tedious and resourceless compared to his *Don Juan*; but it has a charm and freshness that Mozart could not recapture, young as he was when he died. To ask Morris to give Sigurd the charm of Guinevere—a charm of helplessness, weakness, innocence, boyish romance—was like asking any poet of fifty to give us an Alastor: he could not if he would, and, what is perhaps more to the point, he would not if he could, because no man will go back on a good bargain merely because one of the coins he had to pay away was a sixpence he had once tried to break with a girl sweetheart. We must put up with these inevitables; and Dixon Scott's complaint that Morris did not spend life defending Guinevere is no more sensible than an essay complaining that General Douglas Haig can no longer cut a figure as a sprinter. But when the youth takes it so seriously that he must needs proceed to set up the most laboriously ingenious explanations of why Morris and the rest of us deliberately stifled our instincts; corrupted our natures; and perverted our talents instead of going on writing Guineveres and Alastors for him: in short, of why we grew up expressly to spite him, he goes over the edge

of silly-cleverness into the abyss of folly. One has a startled sense of the artist conceived as a pet lapdog for the dilettanti having his growth stunted by a diet of gin in order that he may be a more amusing monster than Nature made him.

I should not quarrel with this folly if it were recognized as such; for a good deal of new country is discovered by simply going astray. The straight and narrow path has been so often explored that we all go a little way down the paths of danger and destruction merely to see what they are like; and even the paths of tomfoolery may lead to a view or two. Dixon Scott had qualifications for such rambling which made him a very agreeable critic, and sometimes a very useful one. Chief among these was his knowledge of the natural history of the artist, which preserved him from many current journalistic sillinesses. To take a personal example, the fact that I am an Irish Protestant, and that I published a volume called *Three Plays for Puritans*, has created a legend about the gloomy, sour, Sabbath-ridden, Ulster-Covenanting home in which I was brought up, and in which my remarkable resemblance to St. Paul, St. Anthony, and John Knox was stamped on me. To Dixon Scott this was as patently absurd as an assumption that the polar bear owes his black fur to his Negro parents. He at once picked out the truth and packed it into the statement that I am the son of Donizetti's Lucrezia Borgia. (As a matter of fact I was brought up in an atmosphere in which two of the main constituents were Italian opera and complete freedom of thought; and my attitude to conventional British life ever since has been that of a missionary striving to understand the superstitions of the natives in order to make himself intelligible to them.) All through this book, in dealing with me, with Wells, with Kipling, with Houghton, he is saved again and again by his knowledge of the sort of animal the artist is in his nonage. Unfortunately his knowledge stops there. He does not understand the artist's manhood; protests with all his soul against the inevitable development; and always, however ridiculously, sets up the same theory that the shy romantic dreamer has put on a mask, which, as he wittily says, gets so hard pressed upon his face by popular applause that it moulds his very features to its shape. Shaw, Kipling, Wells & Co. are timid children desperately playing at being strong but by no means silent men; and he tries to strip our masks off, and show our real faces, which, however, are all the same face, and a very obvious doll's face at that. His mistake is in taking the method of nature, which is a dramatic method, for a theatrical pose. No doubt every man has a shy child in him, artist or no artist. But every man whose business it is to work upon other men, whether as artist, politician, advocate, propagandist, organizer, teacher or what not, must dramatize himself and play his part. To the laborer who merely digs and vegetates, to the squire who merely hunts and eats, to the mathematician and physicist, these men of the platform and the tribune may seem affected and theatrical; but when they themselves desire to impress their needs or views on their fellows they find that they, too, must find a pose or else remain paralyzed and dumb. In short, what is called a pose is simply a technical condition of certain activities. It is offensive only when out of place: the artist who brings his pose to the dinner table is like the general who puts his sword, or the dentist who puts his forceps, beside his plate just to show that he has one. He cannot, however, always leave it behind him. Queen Victoria complained that Gladstone talked to her as if she were a public meeting; but surely that is the way in which a prime minister should address a

queen when affairs of state are on the carpet. Lord Melbourne's pose may have been more genial and human; but so it would when he addressed a public meeting doubtless. Dixon Scott takes this very simple natural phenomenon, and, guessing at once that he can be very clever about it if he begins by being very stupid, pays that price for being clever. It is monstrously stupid to try to foist Morris, Wells, and Kipling (to say nothing of myself) on the reader as creatures with guilty secrets, all their secrets being the same secret: to wit, that they are not Morris, Wells, and Kipling at all, but sensitive plants of quite another species. Still, on that stupid assumption he writes very cleverly, sometimes with penetrating subtlety. But as he remains the Fancier, he is never sound, and is only quite satisfactory when dealing with pure virtuosity, which he finds only in Max Beer-bohm's *Zuleika*. And then he has to leave you in ignorance of the fact that Max is the most savage Radical caricaturist since Gillray, and that *Zuleika* is only his play, not his work.

It was a kind and devoted act of Mr. St. John Adcock to collect and edit these reviews, and very modest of him to allow Max to take the stage as their introducer. They are the best monument their untimely slain author could have desired. I have no space here to do more than point out the limitations of Dixon Scott's view of art, and how the young literary voluptuary flourished at the expense of the critic of life. But I can guarantee the book as being not only frightfully smart in the wrong places, but, in the best of the right ones, as good as it is in the nature of the best journalistic criticism to be.

G. B. S.

The Ethics of Economic Reform

Distributive Justice, by John A. Ryan, D.D. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.50.

NOW when the rage for departmentalizing human knowledge is spent, the candid economist must recall with some sense of shame his early attempts to exclude ethical elements from his scientific domain. "It is our business to determine what is and what will be; what ought to be concerns other specialists." How stupid this sounds to-day! As a matter of fact economics never succeeded in winning its freedom from ethics. Only little men ever were able to discuss child labor, the sweating system, monopolistic extortion, without generating at least a modicum of moral heat. Indeed, it would hardly be too much to say that the chief impetus to economic study, ever since the days of Adam Smith, has been the urgency of economic and social reforms that have no meaning apart from ethics.

Ethical judgments abound in economic literature, but these are derivative from common sense, not from any logical system of ethics. This is the fault of the ethical systematizers as well as of the economists. Few ethical authorities have had sufficient knowledge of economic facts to adapt ethical principles to the economic field; few economists are abreast of the best modern work in ethics. To this rule the most notable exception among contemporary writers is Dr. Ryan. His economic scholarship is unimpeachable; survey his writings, and you are forced to the conclusion that among the economists of to-day there are not many who can match him in command of the literature and in sanity of judgment. He would not make a