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Readers and Writers (1917-1921)

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Preface

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Under the title of “Readers and Writers” and over the initials “R. H. C.” I contributed to the *New Age*, during a period of seven or eight years, a weekly literary causerie of which the present volume, covering the years 1917-1921, is a partial reprint. My original design was to treat literary events from week to week with the continuity, consistency and policy ordinarily applied to comments on current political events; that is to say, with equal seriousness and from a similarly more or less fixed point of view as regards both means and end. This design involved of necessity a freedom of expression rather out of fashion, though it was the convention of the greatest period of English literature, namely, the Eighteenth Century; and its pursuit in consequence brought the comments into somewhat lively disrepute. That, however, proved not to be the greatest difficulty. Indeed, within the last few years an almost general demand for more serious, more outspoken and even more “savage” criticism has been heard, and is perhaps on the way to being satisfied, though literary susceptibilities are still far from being as well-mannered as political susceptibilities. The greatest difficulty is encountered in the fact that literary events, unlike political events, occur with little apparent order, and are subject to no easily discoverable or demonstrable direction. In a single week every literary form and tendency may find itself illustrated, with the consequence that any attempt to set the week’s doings in a relation of significant development is bound to

fall under the suspicion of impressionism or arbitrariness. I have no other defence against these charges than Plato's appeal to good judges, of whom the best because the last is Time. Time will pronounce as only those living critics can whose present judgments are an anticipation of Time's. Time will show what has been right and what wrong. Already, moreover, a certain amount of winnowing and sifting has taken place. Some literary values of this moment are not what they were yesterday or the day before. A few are greater; many of them are less. My most confident prediction, however, remains to be confirmed: it is that the perfect English style is still to be written. That it may be in our own time is both the goal and the guiding-star of all literary criticism that is not idle chatter.

A. R. ORAGE.

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Readers and Writers

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Fontenelle.—There is a reason that Fontenelle has never before been translated into English. It is not that Mr. Ezra Pound, who has now translated a dozen of Fontenelle's dialogues, was the first to think of it. Many readers of the original have tried their hand at the translation only to discover that somehow or other Fontenelle would not "go" in English as he goes in French. The reason is not very far to seek. Fontenelle wrote a French peculiarly French, a good but an untranslatable French. He must, therefore, be left and read in the original if he is to be appreciated at his intrinsic value. Mr. Pound has made a rash attempt at the impossible in these dialogues, and he has achieved the unreadable through no further fault of his own.

The result was foregone. The dialogues themselves in their English form are a little more dull than are the *Conversations* of Landor, which is to say that they are very dull indeed. Nothing at the first glance could be more attractive than dialogues between the great dead of the world. To every tyro the notion comes inevitably sooner or later, as if it were the idea for which the world were waiting. Nevertheless, on attempting it, the task is found to be beyond most human powers. Nobody has yet written a masterpiece in it. Fontenelle was not in any case the man to succeed in it from an English point of view. We English take the great dead seriously. We expect them to converse paradisaically in paradise, and to be as much above their own living level as their living level was above that of ordinary men. Here, however, is a pretty task for a writer of dead dialogues, for he has not only to imitate the style, but to

glorify both the matter and style of the greatest men of past ages. No wonder that he fails; no wonder that in the vast majority of cases he produces much the same impression of his heroes as is produced of them at spiritualistic séances. The attempt, however, will always continue to be made. It is a literary cactus-form that blooms every fifty years or so. As I calculate its periodicity, some one should shortly be producing a new series.

Biography.—Very few biographers have been anywhere near the level of mind of their subjects, and fewer still have been able to describe even what they have understood. The character of a great man is so complex that a genius for grasping essentials must be assumed in his perfect biographer: at the same time, it is so tedious in the analysis that the narrative must be condensed to represent it.

Between the subtlety to be described, and the simplicity with which it must be described, the character of a man is likely to fall in his portrait into the distortion of over-elaboration or into the sketch. Though difficult, however, the art has been frequently shown to be not impossible. We could not ask for a better portrait of Johnson than Boswell's. Lockhart's *Life of Scott* is as good as we desire it to be. Plato's *Socrates* is truer than life; and there are others. On the whole, the modern gossiping method is not likely to become popular in a cultured country.

The Responsibility of the Press.—From his little brush with the Press, Dr. Lyttelton has come off badly. It was not because his case was bad, but because he had not the moral courage to stick to his guns. His case was that Parliament had practically ceased to be the leader of the nation,

and that its place had been taken by the Press. Unfortunately, however, the Press had come to depend for its living upon sensationalism, with the consequence that its tendency was to prefer fiction to fact. A perfectly good case, I say, who know more of Fleet Street than Dr. Lyttelton will ever know. Every word of the indictment is well within the truth. But when challenged by the Press to substantiate his charges, Dr. Lyttelton, instead of inviting the world simply to *look* at the Press and to contrast its reports with facts, proceeded to exculpate the editors and to put the whole blame on the public. It is the public, he said, that is responsible, and there is no use in rating the editors, who merely supplied what the public wanted. But so long as public men adopt this cowardly attitude nothing can possibly be done, for the "public," like a corporation, has neither a body to be kicked nor a soul to be damned.

Relatively to the proprietors and editors of the Press the public consists of irresponsible individuals, who merely choose from among what is laid before them. They are mostly as innocent as children who deal at a tuck-shop, and, perchance, buy sweets and cakes that are bad for them as readily as things that are good for them. The responsible parties are the proprietors and editors, and, above them, the law. It is not an offence to buy articles at a shop that are illegally displayed for sale. The public supposition is that if they are on sale they can be bought. And, in fact, the Public Prosecutor, unlike Dr. Lyttelton, does not proceed against the purchasers of illegal articles, he proceeds against the vendors. In the case of our newspaper proprietors and editors the conditions of shop-keeping are parallel; they expose professed news and views for sale, with an implied guarantee that their goods are both

good and fit for human consumption. The public cannot be expected to know which is which, or what is what, any more in the case of news and views than in the case of tea and potatoes. Rather less indeed, since the ill-effects of false news and unsound views are, as a rule, too long delayed and too subtle to be attributed to their proper causes. But the Press proprietors and editors know very well. They know whether the news they expose is true, or the views they vend are sound. They know also that in a large degree they are neither the one nor the other. Yet they continue to sell them, and even to expect public honours for their fraudulent dealings. The excuses made for them are such as could be made for any other fraudulent industry; that it pays, that the public swallows it, that honesty would not pay, that the public does not want truth and sincerity, that the public must learn to discriminate for itself.

Reduced to a simple statement, all these mean, in effect, that the Press is prepared to trade on the ignorance and folly of the public. So long as editors and proprietors are allowed to sail off from responsibility under the plea that they are only satisfying a public demand, so long will it be possible for purveyors of other forms of indecent literature and vendors of other articles of public ill-fare to complain that they are unfairly treated. There is likely to be always a demand for fiction against fact, the plausible lie against the honest truth, the doctored news against the plain statement, and the pleasing superficial against the strenuous profound. A change of taste in these respects could only be brought about by a determined effort in education extending over a generation and applied not only to schools, but to the Press, the pulpit, and to book-publishing. But because the preference now exists, and is a

profitable taste to pander to, it is not right to acquit the Press that thrives on it.

Critics Beware.—Mr. Crees, the author of a new study of George Meredith, has first pointed out one of the dangers in writing about Meredith and then fallen into it. Everybody knows what it is; it is writing in epigram, or, as Mr. Crees calls it, "miscarrying with abortive epigram." That phrase alone should have warned Mr. Crees how near he was to ignoring his own counsel; but apparently he saw only the idea and not the fact, for a passage soon occurs in which he illustrates the danger perfectly. He is writing of the difficulty encountered by a certain kind of intellectual—Meredith, for example—in winning any public recognition; and this is the way he miscarries on:

The idol of the future is the Aunt Sally of the present. The pioneer of intellect ploughs a lonely furrow. He is assailed by invective, beset by contumely, the butt of ridicule, the Saint Sebastian of the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism. He is depressed by disregard, chilled by the icy waters of contempt, haunted by the dread of beggary, the recompense of strictness of conviction.... And when detraction recites its palinode, his sole compensation is to reply (from the Elysian fields), "I told you so."

There are many untruths contained in this passage, some flattering and others not, to the "intellectual," and they are properly expressed—if untruths ever can be—in the style. The style is one in which the truth cannot be told; and it perfectly illustrates the axiom that critical writing cannot be too simple and unaffected. It is a common practice for a critic to approximate his style to the style of his subject; for example, to write about poetry poetically, about a "grand impassioned writer" in a grand and impassioned manner. By so doing it is supposed that a critic shows his sympathy and his understanding of his subject. But the method is wrong. Criticism is not a fine art. The conversational tone is its proper medium, and it should be an absolute rule never to write in criticism what cannot be imagined as being easily said.

HENRY JAMES.—The "Henry James Number" of the *Little Review* is devoted to essays by various hands upon the works and characteristics of

the late novelist. The most interesting essay in the volume is one by Miss Ethel Coburn Mayne reporting the first appearance and subsequent development of Henry James as witnessed by the writers for the famous *Yellow Book*, of whom Miss Mayne was not the least characteristic. What a comedy of misunderstanding it all was, and how Henry James must have smiled about it! At the outset the *Yellow Book* writers had the distinct impression that Henry James was one of themselves; and they looked forward to exploiting the new worlds which he brought into their ken. But later on, to their disappointment, he fell away, receded from their visibility, and became, as Miss Mayne puts it, concerned less with the "world" than with the "drawing-room." The fault, however, was not with James, nor was the change in him. The *Yellow Book* too readily assumed that because James wrote in it, he was willing to be

identified with the tendency of the school; and they thought him lacking in loyalty when afterwards it appeared that he was powerfully hostile. But how could they have deceived themselves into supposing that a progress towards the ghostly could always keep step with a progress towards the fleshly? The two were worlds apart, and if for a single moment they coincided in an issue or two of the *Yellow Book*, their subsequent divergence was only made the more obvious. I, even I, who was still young when the *Yellow Book* began to appear, could have told its editors that Henry James was not long for their world. Between the method employed in, say, the *Death of the Lion* and the method of Henry Harland, Max Beerbohm, Miss Mayne herself, and, subsequently, Mr. D. H. Lawrence, there was, and could be, only an accidental and momentary sympathy. James was in love with the next world, or the next state of

consciousness; he was always exploring the borderland between the conscious and the super-conscious. The *Yellow Book* writers were positively reactionary to him, for their borderland was not between men and angels, but between men and beasts. James's "contemptuous" word for Mr. D. H. Lawrence—which Miss Mayne still groans to think of—was the most natural and inevitable under the circumstances. It might have been foreseen from the moment Henry James put his pen into the *Yellow Book*. If there are any critics left who imagine that the *Yellow Book* was anything but a literary *cul de sac*, I commend to them this present essay by Miss Mayne. Under the disguise of criticism of Henry James, it is a confession.

Henry James's *Middle Years* is a fragment of the autobiography begun some years before the author's death. We are told that this fragment was "dictated" by Henry James and that it was never revised by himself, both of which facts explain a little of the peculiarity of his style. If

the style of the earlier books was mazy, the style of *Middle Years* is mazier. If the earlier style consisted of impressions impassionately conveyed, the present is more elusive still. Henry James was always difficult to pin down; in *Middle Years* his fluttering among words never rests a sentence. Nobody, I am convinced, who is not either a genuine devotee of Henry James or one of the paper-audience his friends cultivated for him, will succeed in reading through this work. An infinitely leisurely mind or an infinite interest in just Henry James's way of looking at things is necessary to the endurance of it. But given one of these, and in particular the latter, and the reading of *Middle Years* becomes an exhilarating exercise in sensing ghosts.

Yes, that is the phrase to describe what Henry James was always after. He was always after sensing ghosts. His habitat has been said to be the inter-space between the real and the ideal; but it can be more accurately defined as the inter-space between the dead and the living. You see his vision—almost his clairvoyance—actively engaged in this recovery of his experiences years before as a young man in London. See how he revelled in them, rolling them off his tongue in long circling phrases. Is it not obvious that he is most at home in recollection, in the world of memory, in the inter-world, once more, of the dead and the living? Observe, too, how only a little more exaggeratedly anfractuous and swirling his style becomes—but not, in any real sense, different—under the influence of memory, than when professing to be describing the present. It is plain that memory differs for him from present vision only in being a little more vivid, a little more real. In order to see a thing

clearly, he had, in fact, to make a memory of it, and the present tense of memory is impression. What I am trying to say is that Henry James mentalised phenomenon; hence that he saw most clearly in the world of memory where this process had been performed for him by time; and that he saw less clearly in our actual world because the phenomena herein resisted immediate mentalisation. The difference for him was between the pre-digested and the to-be-digested; the former being the persons and events of memory, and the latter being the events and persons of his current experience.

Henry James will find himself very much at home with the discarnate minds who, it is presumed, are now his companions. Incarnation, embodiment, was for him a screen to be looked through, got over somehow, divined into, penetrated. He regarded it as a sort of magic curtain which concealed at the same time that under careful observation it revealed by its shadows and movements the mind behind it. And I fancy I see him sitting before the actual sensible world of things and persons with infinite patience watching for a significant gesture or a revealing shadow. And such motions and shadows he recorded as impressions which became the stuff of his analysis and synthesis of the souls that originated them. But if that was his attitude towards the material world—and it is further proved by his occasional excursions into the completely ghostly—may we not safely conclude that in the world he now inhabits his sense of impressions is more at home still. For there, as I take it, the curtain is drawn, and minds and souls are by one degree the more exposed to direct vision. With his

marvellous insight into the actual, what would Henry James not make of the mental and psychic when these are no longer concealed by the material? On the whole, nobody is likely to be happier “dead” than Henry James.

Turgenev.—Both in Mr. Conrad’s Introduction and Mr. Edward Garnett’s critical study of Turgenev I observe the attitude of defence. They are defending rather than praising Turgenev. But Turgenev has been so long the victim of polemics that it is about time some judge summed up the contentions and delivered judgment. Neither Mr. Conrad nor Mr. Garnett, however, is qualified for this task by either temper or the power of judgment itself. Mr. Conrad is a great writer, but he is not a great critic, and as for Mr. Garnett, he is not even a great writer; and the temper of both is shown in their common tendency to abuse not only the plaintiff’s attorney but the jury as well. But there is no use in abusing the jury—in other words, the reading

public of the world—even if some gain may be got by polemics with this or that critic. I am content to hear Mr. Maurice Baring and M. Haumont told that they are merely echoes of Russian partisanship and incapable of feeling the fine shades of "truth" in Turgenev; for both these writers are quite capable of hitting back. But when Mr. Conrad satirically remarks that Turgenev had qualities enough to ruin the prospects of any writer, and Mr. Garnett echoes *him* to the effect that Turgenev owes his "unpopularity" to "an exquisite feeling for balance" which nowadays is "less and less prized by modern opinion," I feel that the defence of Turgenev is exceeding the limits of discretion. For it is not by any means the case that the "unpopularity" of Turgenev is confined to the mob that has no feeling for balance or is jealous of his possession of too many qualities. Critics as good as Mr. Garnett and with no Russian political

prejudices against Turgenev can come to the same conclusion as the innumerable anonymous gentlemen of the jury, to wit, that Turgenev was a great artist on a small scale whose faults were large. That is certainly my own case. While I agree (or affirm, for I am quite willing to take the initiative), that Turgenev's art is more exquisite, more humane, more European than that of any other Russian writer, I must also maintain that in timidity of thought, in sentimentality, in occasional pettiness of mind, he is no more of a great writer than, let us say, Mr. Hall Caine. To compare the whole of him with the whole of Dostoievski is to realise in an instant the difference between a writer great in parts and a writer great even in his faults. Turgenev at his best is a European, I would rather say a Parisianised Russian; but Dostoievski, while wholly Russian, belongs to the world. An almost exact parallel is afforded