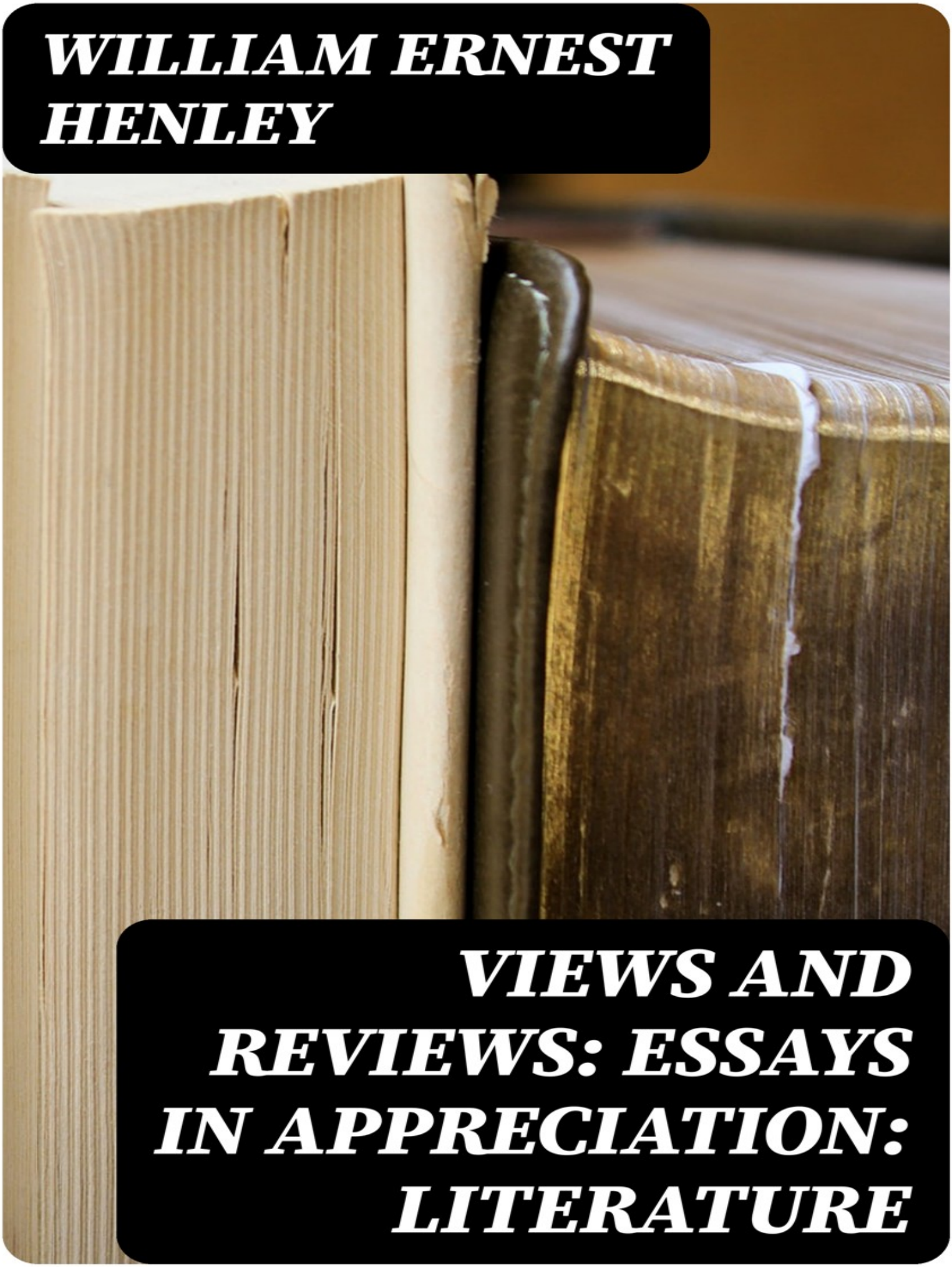
WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY



VIEWS AND REVIEWS: ESSAYS IN APPRECIATION: LITERATURE

William Ernest Henley

Views and Reviews: Essays in appreciation: Literature

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VIEWS AND REVIEWS

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PREFATORY

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Suggested by one friend and selected and compiled by another, this volume is less a book than a mosaic of scraps and shreds recovered from the shot rubbish of some fourteen years of journalism. Thus, the notes on Longfellow, Balzac, Sidney, Tourneur, 'Arabian Nights Entertainments,' Borrow, George Eliot, and Mr. Frederick Locker are extracted from originals in 'London'—a print still remembered with affection by those concerned in it; those on Labiche, Champfleury, Richardson, Fielding, Byron, Gay, Congreve, Boswell, 'Essays and Essayists,' Jefferies, Hood, Matthew Arnold, Lever, Thackeray, Dickens, M. Théodore de Banville, Mr. Austin Dobson, and Mr. George Meredith from articles contributed to 'The Athenæum'; those on Dumas, Count Tolstoï's novels, and the verse of Dr. Hake from 'The Saturday Review'; those on Walton, Landor, and Heine from 'The Scots Observer,' 'The Academy,' and 'Vanity Fair' respectively; while the 'Disraeli' has been pieced together from 'London,' 'Vanity Fair,' and 'The Athenæum'; the 'Berlioz' from 'The Scots Observer' and 'The Saturday Review'; the 'Tennyson' from 'The Scots Observer' and 'The Magazine of Art'; the 'Homer and Theocritus' from 'Vanity Fair' and the defunct 'Teacher'; the 'Hugo' from 'The Athenæum,' 'The Magazine of Art,' and an unpublished fragment written for 'The Scottish Church.' In all cases permission to reprint is hereby gratefully acknowledged; but the reprinted matter has been subjected to such a process of revision and reconstitution that much of it is practically new, while little or none remains as it was. I venture, then, to hope that the result, for all its scrappiness, will be found

to have that unity which comes of method and an honest regard for letters.

W. E. H.

*Edin*r*. 8th May* 1890

DICKENS

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A ‘Frightful Minus’

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Mr. Andrew Lang is delightfully severe on those who ‘cannot read Dickens,’ but in truth it is only by accident that he is not himself of that unhappy persuasion. For Dickens the humourist he has a most uncompromising enthusiasm; for Dickens the artist in drama and romance he has as little sympathy as the most practical. Of the prose of *David Copperfield* and *Our Mutual Friend*, the *Tale of Two Cities* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, he disdains to speak. He is almost fierce (for him) in his denunciation of Little Nell and Paul Dombey; he protests that Monks and Ralph Nickleby are ‘too steep,’ as indeed they are. But of Bradley Headstone and Sydney Carton he says not a word; while of *Martin Chuzzlewit*—but here he shall speak for himself, the italics being a present to him. ‘I have read in that book a score of times,’ says he; ‘I never see it but I revel in it—in Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp and the Americans. *But what the plot is all about*, *what Jonas did*, *what Montague Tigg had to make in the matter*, *what all the pictures with plenty of shading illustrate*, *I have never been able to comprehend*.’ This is almost as bad as the reflection (in a magazine) that

Jonas Chuzzlewit is ‘the most shadowy murderer in fiction.’ Yet it is impossible to be angry. In his own way and within his own limits Mr. Lang is such a thoroughgoing admirer of Dickens that you are moved to compassion when you think of the much he loses by ‘being constitutionally incapable’ of perfect apprehension. ‘How poor,’ he cries, with generous enthusiasm, ‘the world of fancy would be, “how dispeopled of her dreams,” if, in some ruin of the social system, the books of Dickens were lost; and if The Dodger, and Charley Bates, and Mr. Crinkle and Miss Squeers and Sam Weller, and Mrs. Gamp, and Dick Swiveller were to perish, or to vanish with Menander’s men and women! We cannot think of our world without them; and, children of dreams as they are, they seem more essential than great statesmen, artists, soldiers, who have actually worn flesh and blood, ribbons and orders, gowns and uniforms.’ Nor is this all. He is almost prepared to welcome ‘free education,’ since ‘every Englishman who can read, unless he be an Ass, is a reader the more’ for Dickens. Does it not give one pause to reflect that the writer of this charming eulogy can only read the half of Dickens, and is half the ideal of his own denunciation.

His Method.

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Dickens’s imagination was diligent from the outset; with him conception was not less deliberate and careful than development; and so much he confesses when he describes himself as ‘in the first stage of a new book, which consists in going round and round the idea, as you see a bird in his cage go about and about his sugar before he touches it.’ ‘I

have no means,’ he writes to a person wanting advice, ‘of knowing whether you are patient in the pursuit of this art; but I am inclined to think that you are not, and that you do not discipline yourself enough. When one is impelled to write this or that, one has still to consider: “How much of this will tell for what I mean? How much of it is my own wild emotion and superfluous energy—how much remains that is truly belonging to this ideal character and these ideal circumstances?” It is in the laborious struggle to make this distinction, and in the determination to try for it, that the road to the correction of faults lies. [Perhaps I may remark, in support of the sincerity with which I write this, that I am an impatient and impulsive person myself, but that it has been for many years the constant effort of my life to practise at my desk what I preach to you.]’ Such golden words could only have come from one enamoured of his art, and holding the utmost endeavour in its behalf of which his heart and mind were capable for a matter of simple duty. They are a proof that Dickens—in intention at least, and if in intention then surely, the fact of his genius being admitted, to some extent in fact as well—was an artist in the best sense of the term.

His Development.

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In the beginning he often wrote exceeding ill, especially when he was doing his best to write seriously. He developed into an artist in words as he developed into an artist in the construction and the evolution of a story. But his development was his own work, and it is a fact that should

redound eternally to his honour that he began in newspaper English, and by the production of an imitation of the *novela picaresca*—a string of adventures as broken and disconnected as the adventures of Lazarillo de Tormes or Peregrine Pickle, and went on to become an exemplar. A man self-made and self-taught, if he knew anything at all about the ‘art for art’ theory—which is doubtful—he may well have held it cheap enough. But he practised Millet’s dogma—*Dans l’art il faut sa peau*—as resolutely as Millet himself, and that, too, under conditions that might have proved utterly demoralising had he been less robust and less sincere. He began as a serious novelist with Ralph Nickleby and Lord Frederick Verisopht; he went on to produce such masterpieces as Jonas Chuzzlewit and Doubledick, and Eugene Wrayburn and the immortal Mrs. Gamp, and Fagin and Sikes and Sydney Carton, and many another. The advance is one from positive weakness to positive strength, from ignorance to knowledge, from incapacity to mastery, from the manufacture of lay figures to the creation of human beings.

His Results.

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His faults were many and grave. He wrote some nonsense; he sinned repeatedly against taste; he could be both noisy and vulgar; he was apt to be a caricaturist where he should have been a painter; he was often mawkish and often extravagant; and he was sometimes more inept than a great writer has ever been. But his work, whether bad or good, has in full measure the quality of sincerity. He meant

what he did: and he meant it with his whole heart. He looked upon himself as representative and national—as indeed he was; he regarded his work as a universal possession; and he determined to do nothing that for lack of pains should prove unworthy of his function. If he sinned it was unadvisedly and unconsciously; if he failed it was because he knew no better. You feel that as you read. The freshness and fun of *Pickwick*—a comic middle-class epic, so to speak—seem mainly due to high spirits; and perhaps that immortal book should be described as a first improvisation by a young man of genius not yet sure of either expression or ambition and with only vague and momentary ideas about the duties and necessities of art. But from *Pickwick* onwards to *Edwin Drood* the effort after improvement is manifest. What are *Dombey* and *Dorrit* themselves but the failures of a great and serious artist? In truth the man's genius did but ripen with years and labour; he spent his life in developing from a popular writer into an artist. He extemporised *Pickwick*, it may be, but into *Copperfield* and *Chuzzlewit* and the *Tale of Two Cities* and *Our Mutual Friend* he put his whole might, working at them with a passion of determination not exceeded by Balzac himself. He had enchanted the public without an effort; he was the best-beloved of modern writers almost from the outset of his career. But he had in him at least as much of the French artist as of the middle-class Englishman; and if all his life he never ceased from self-education but went unswervingly in pursuit of culture, it was out of love for his art and because his conscience as an artist would not let him do otherwise. We have been told so often to train ourselves by studying

the practice of workmen like Gautier and Hugo and imitating the virtues of work like *Hernani* and *Quatre-Vingt-Treize* and *l'Education Sentimentale*—we have heard so much of the æsthetic impeccability of Young France and the section of Young England that affects its qualities and reproduces its fashions—that it is hard to refrain from asking if, when all is said, we should not do well to look for models nearer home? if in place of such moulds of form as *Mademoiselle de Maupin* we might not take to considering stuff like *Rizpah* and *Our Mutual Friend*?

Ave atque Vale.

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Yes, he had many and grave faults. But so had Sir Walter and the good Dumas; so, to be candid, had Shakespeare himself—Shakespeare the king of poets. To myself he is always the man of his unrivalled and enchanting letters—is always an incarnation of generous and abounding gaiety, a type of beneficent earnestness, a great expression of intellectual vigour and emotional vivacity. I love to remember that I came into the world contemporaneously with some of his bravest work, and to reflect that even as he was the inspiration of my boyhood so is he a delight of my middle age. I love to think that while English literature endures he will be remembered as one that loved his fellow-men, and did more to make them happy and amiable than any other writer of his time.

THACKERAY

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His Worshippers.

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It is odd to note how opinions differ as to the greatness of Thackeray and the value of his books. Some regard him as the greatest novelist of his age and country and as one of the greatest of any country and any age. These hold him to be not less sound a moralist than excellent as a writer, not less magnificently creative than usefully and delightfully cynical, not less powerful and complete a painter of manners than infallible as a social philosopher and incomparable as a lecturer on the human heart. They accept Amelia Sedley for a very woman; they believe in Colonel Newcome—'by *Don Quixote* out of *Little Nell*'—as in something venerable and heroic; they regard William Dobbin and 'Stunning' Warrington as finished and subtle portraitures; they think Becky Sharp an improvement upon Mme. Marneffe and Wenham better work than Rigby; they are in love with Laura Bell, and refuse to see either cruelty or caricature in their poet's presentment of Alcide de Mirobolant. Thackeray's fun, Thackeray's wisdom, Thackeray's knowledge of men and women, Thackeray's morality, Thackeray's view of life, 'his wit and humour, his pathos, and his umbrella,' are all articles of belief with them. Of Dickens they will not hear; Balzac they incline to despise; if they make any comparison between Thackeray and Fielding, or Thackeray and Richardson, or Thackeray and Sir Walter, or Thackeray and Disraeli, it is to the disadvantage of Disraeli and Scott and Richardson and Fielding. All these were well enough in their way and day; but they are not to be classed with Thackeray. It is said, no doubt, that

Thackeray could neither make stories nor tell them; but he liked stories for all that, and by the hour could babble charmingly of *Ivanhoe* and the *Mousquetaires*. It is possible that he was afraid of passion, and had no manner of interest in crime. But then, how hard he bore upon snobs, and how vigorously he lashed the smaller vices and the meaner faults! It may be beyond dispute that he was seldom good at romance, and saw most things—art and nature included—rather prosaically and ill-naturedly, as he might see them who has been for many years a failure, and is naturally a little resentful of other men's successes; but then, how brilliant are his studies of club humanity and club manners! how thoroughly he understands the feelings of them that go down into the West in broughams! If he writes by preference for people with a thousand a year, is it not the duty of everybody with a particle of self-respect to have that income? Is it possible that any one who has it not can have either wit or sentiment, humour or understanding? Thackeray writes *of* gentlemen *for* gentlemen; therefore he is alone among artists; therefore he is 'the greatest novelist of his age.' That is the faith of the true believer: that the state of mind of him that reveres less wisely than thoroughly, and would rather be damned with Thackeray than saved with any one else.

His Critics.

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The position of them that wear their rue with a difference, and do not agree that all literature is contained in *The Book of Snobs* and *Vanity Fair*, is more easily

defended. They like and admire their Thackeray in many ways, but they think him rather a writer of genius who was innately and irredeemably a Philistine than a supreme artist or a great man. To them there is something artificial in the man and something insincere in the artist: something which makes it seem natural that his best work should smack of the literary *tour de force*, and that he should never have appeared to such advantage as when, in *Esmond* and in *Barry Lyndon*, he was writing up to a standard and upon a model not wholly of his own contrivance. They admit his claim to eminence as an adventurer in ‘the discovery of the Ugly’; but they contend that even there he did his work more shrewishly and more pettily than he might; and in this connection they go so far as to reflect that a snob is not only ‘one who meanly admires mean things,’ as his own definition declares, but one who meanly detests mean things as well. They agree with Walter Bagehot that to be perpetually haunted by the plush behind your chair is hardly a sign of lofty literary and moral genius; and they consider him narrow and vulgar in his view of humanity, limited in his outlook upon life, inclined to be envious, inclined to be tedious and pedantic, prone to repetitions, and apt in bidding for applause to appeal to the baser qualities of his readers and to catch their sympathy by making them feel themselves spitefully superior to their fellow-men. They look at his favourite heroines—at Laura and Ethel and Amelia; and they can but think him stupid who could ever have believed them interesting or admirable or attractive or true. They listen while he regrets it is impossible for him to attempt the picture of a man; and, with Barry Lyndon in