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BOOK-WORSHIP

A book belongs in a peculiar manner to the age and nation that produce it. It is an emanation of the thought of the time; and if it survive to an after-time, it remains as a landmark of the progress of the imagination or the intellect. Some books do even more than this: they press forward to the future age, and make appeals to its maturer genius; but in so doing they still belong to their own—they still wear the garb which stamps them as appertaining to a particular epoch. Of that epoch, it is true, they are, intellectually, the flower and chief; they are the expression of its finer spirit, and serve as a link between the two generations of the past and the future; but of that future—so much changed in habits, and feelings, and knowledge—they can never, even when acting as guides and teachers, form an essential part: there is always some bond of sympathy wanting.

A single glance at our own great books will illustrate this—books which are constantly reprinted, without which no library can be tolerated—which are still, generation after generation, the objects of the national worship, and are popularly supposed to afford a universal and unfailing standard of excellence in the various departments of literature. These books, although pored over as a task and a study by the few, are rarely opened and never read by the many: they are known the least by those who reverence them most. They are, in short, idols, and their worship is not a faith, but a superstition. This kind of belief is not shaken even by experience. When a devourer of the novels of Scott, for instance, takes up *Tom Jones*, he, after a vain attempt to read, may lay it down with a feeling of surprise and dissatisfaction; but *Tom Jones* remains still to his convictions 'an epic in prose,' the fiction *par excellence* of the language. As for *Clarissa Harlowe* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, we have not heard of any common reader in our generation who has had the hardihood even to open the volumes; but Richardson as well as Fielding retains his original niche among the gods of romance; and we find Scott himself one of the high-priests of the worship. When wandering once upon the continent, we were thrown for several days into the company of an English clergyman, who had provided himself, as the best possible model in description, with a copy of Spenser; and it was curious to observe the pertinacity with which, from time to time, he drew forth his treasure, and the weariness with which in a few minutes he returned it to his pocket. Yet our reverend friend, we have no doubt, went home with his faith in Spenser unshaken, and recommends it to this day as the most delightful of all companions for a journey.

In the present century, the French and German critics have begun to place this reverential feeling for the 'classics' of a language upon a more rational basis. In estimating an author, they throw themselves back into the times in which he wrote; they determine his place among the spirits of his own age; and ascertain the practical influence his works have exercised over those of succeeding generations. In short, they judge him relatively, not absolutely; and thus convert an unreasoning superstition into a sober faith. We do not require to be told that in every book destined to survive its author, there are here and there gleams of nature that belong to all time; but the body of the work is after the fashion of the age that produced it; and he who is unacquainted with the thought of that age, will always judge amiss. In England, we are still in the bonds of the last century, and it is surprising what an amount of affectation mingles with criticism even of the highest pretensions. It is no wonder, then, that common readers should be mistaken in their book-worship. To such persons, for all their blind reverence, Dante must in reality be a wild beast—a fine animal, it is true, but still a wild beast—and our own Milton a polemical pedant arguing by the light of poetry. To such readers, the spectacle of Ugolino devouring the head of Ruggieri, and wiping his jaws with the hair that he might tell his story, cannot fail to give a feeling of horror and disgust, which even the glorious wings of Dante's angels—the most sublime of all such creations—would fail to chase away. The poetry of the Divine Comedy belongs to nature; its superstition, intolerance, and fanaticism, to the thirteenth century. These last have either passed away from the modern world or they exist in new forms, and with the first alone can we have any real healthy sympathy.

One of our literary idols is Shakspeare—perhaps the greatest of them all; but although the most universal of poets, his works, taken in the mass, belong to the age of Queen Elizabeth, not to ours. A critic has well said, that if Shakspeare were now living, he would manifest the same dramatic power, but under different forms; and his taste, his knowledge, and his beliefs would all be different. This, however, is not the opinion of the book-worshippers: it is not the poetry alone of Shakspeare, but the work bodily, which is preeminent with them; not that which is universal in his genius, but that likewise which is restricted by the fetters of time and country. The commentators, in the same way, find it their business to bring up his shortcomings to his ideal character, not to account for their existence by the manners and prejudices of his age, or the literary models on which his taste was formed. It would be easy to run over, in this way, the list of all our great authors, and to shew that book-worship, as contradistinguished from a wise and discriminating respect, is nothing more than a vulgar superstition.

We are the more inclined to put forth these ideas, at a time when reprints are the order of the day—when speculators, with a singular blindness, are ready to take hold of almost anything that comes in their way without the expense of copyright. It would be far more judicious to employ persons of a correct and elegant taste to separate the local and temporary from the universal and immortal part of our classics, and give us, in an independent form, what belongs to ourselves and to all time. A movement was made some years ago in this direction by Mr Craik, who printed in one of Charles Knight's publications a summary of the *Faëry Queen*, converting the prosaic portions into prose, and giving only the true poetry in the rich and musical verses of Spenser. A travelling companion like this, we venture to assure our clerical friend, would not be pocketed so wearily as the original work. The harmony of the divine poet would saturate his heart and beam from his eyes; and when wandering where we met him, among the storied ruins of the Rhine, he would have by his side not the man Spenser, surrounded by the prejudices and rudenesses of his age, but the spirit Spenser, discoursing to and with the universal heart of nature. Leigh Hunt, with more originality—more of the quality men call genius, but a less correct perception of what is really wanted—has done the same thing for the great Italian poets; and in his sparkling pages Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, and the rest of the tuneful train, appear unfettered by the more unpleasing peculiarities of their mortal time. But the criticism by which their steps are attended, though full of grace and acuteness, is absolute, not relative. They are judged by a standard of taste and feeling existing in the author's mind: the *Inferno* is a magnificent caldron of everything base and detestable in human nature; and the *Orlando*, a paradise of love, beauty, and delight. Dante, the sublime poet, but inexorable bigot, meets with little tolerance from Leigh Hunt; while Ariosto, exhaustless in his wealth, ardent and exulting—full of the same excess of life which in youth sends the blood dancing and boiling through the veins—has his warmest sympathy. This kind of criticism is but a new form of the error we have pointed out; for both poets receive his homage—the one praised in the spontaneous outpourings of his heart, the other served with the rites of devil-worship.

When we talk of the great authors of one generation pressing forward to claim the sympathy of the *maturer* genius of the next, we mean precisely what we say. We are well aware that some of the great writers we have casually mentioned have no equals in the present world; yet the present world is more mature in point of taste than their own. That is the reason why they *are* great authors now. Some books last for a season, some for a generation, some for an age, or two, or more; always dropping off when the time they reach outstrips them. One of these lost treasures is sometimes reprinted; but if this is done in the hope of a renewed popularity, the speculation is sure to fail. Curious and studious men, it is true, are gratified by the reproduction; but the general reader would prefer a book of his own generation, using the former as materials, and separating its immortal part from its perishing body.

And the general reader, be it remembered, is virtually the age. It is for him the studious think, the imaginative invent, the tuneful sing: beyond him there is no appeal but to the future. He is superstitious, as we have seen, but his gods are few and traditional. He determines to make a stand somewhere; and it is necessary for him to do so, if he would not encumber his literary Olympus with a Hindoo-like pantheon of millions. But how voracious is this general reader in regard to the effusions of his own day! What will become of the myriads of books that have passed through our own unworthy hands? How many of them will survive to the next generation? How many will continue to float still further down the stream of time? How many will attain the honour of the apotheosis? And will they coexist in this exalted state with the old objects of worship? This last is a pregnant question; for each generation will in all probability furnish its quota of the great books of the language, and, if so, a reform in the superstition we have exposed is no longer a matter of mere expedience, but of necessity. We are aware that all this will be pronounced rank heresy by those who assume the style of critics, who usually make a prodigious outcry when a great author is mutilated, even by expunging a word which modern decency excludes from the vocabulary of social and family intercourse. This word, however—supposing it to represent the mortal and perishing part of an author's productions—belongs not to him, but to his age; not to the intellectual man, but to the external and fleeting manners of his day and generation. Such critics usually take credit to themselves for a peculiarly large and liberal spirit; but there seems to us, on the contrary, to be something mean and restricted in views that regard the man as an individual, not as a portion of the genius which belongs to the world. Yet, even as an individual, the man is safe in his entirety, for there is no project of cancelling the printed works extant in our libraries, public and private. The true question simply is: Are great authors to be allowed to become practically obsolete—and many of them have become so already—while we stand upon the delicacies and ceremonies of Book-worship?

OUR TERRACE

London has been often compared to a wilderness—a wilderness of brick, and so in one sense it is; because you may live in London all the days of your life if you choose—and, indeed, if you don't choose, if you happen to be very poor—without exciting observation, or provoking any further questioning than is comprised in a demand for accurate guidance from one place to another, a demand which might be made upon you in an Arabian desert, if there you chanced to meet a stranger. But London is something else besides a wilderness—indeed it is everything else. It is a great world, containing a thousand little worlds in its bosom; and pop yourself down in it in any quarter you will, you are sure to find yourself in the centre of some peculiar microcosm distinguished from all others by features more or less characteristic.

One such little world we have lived in for a round number of years; and as we imagine it presents a picture by no means disagreeable to look upon, we will introduce the reader, with his permission, into its very limited circle, and chronicle its history for one day as faithfully as it is possible for anything to do, short of the Daguerreotype and the tax-gatherer. Our Terrace, then—for that is our little world—is situated in one of the northern, southern, eastern, or western suburbs—we have reasons for not being particular—at the distance of two miles and three-quarters from the black dome of St Paul's. It consists of thirty genteel-looking second-rate houses, standing upon a veritable terrace, at least three feet above the level of the carriage-way, and having small gardens enclosed in iron palisades in front of them. The garden gates open upon a pavement of nine feet in width; the carriage-road is thirty feet across; and on the opposite side is another but lower terrace, surmounted with handsome semi-detached villas, with ample flower-gardens both in front and rear, those in the front being planted, but rather sparingly, with limes, birches, and a few specimens of the white-ash, which in summertime overshadow the pavement, and shelter a passing pedestrian when caught in a shower. At one end of Our Terrace, there is a respectable butcher's shop, a public-house, and a shop which is perpetually changing owners, and making desperate attempts to establish itself as something or other, without any particular partiality for any particular line of business. It has been by turns a print-shop, a stationer's, a circulating library, a toy-shop, a Berlin-wool shop, a music and musical-instrument shop, a haberdasher's shop, a snuff and cigar shop, and one other thing which has escaped our memory—and all within the last seven years. Each retiring speculator has left his stock-in-trade, along with the good-will, to his successor; and at the present moment it is a combination of shops, where everything you don't want is to be found in a state of dilapidation, together with a very hungry-looking proprietor, who, for want of customers upon whom to exercise his ingenuity, pulls away all day long upon the accordion to the tune of *We're a' noddin'*. The other end of Our Terrace has its butcher, its public-house, its grocer, and a small furniture-shop, doing a small trade, under the charge of a very small boy. Let thus much suffice for the physiology of our subject. We proceed to record its history, as it may be read by any one of the inhabitants who chooses to spend the waking hours of a single day in perusing it from his parlour window.

It is a fine morning in the middle of June, and the clock of the church at the end of the road is about striking seven, when the parlour shutters and the street doors of the terrace begin to open one by one. By a quarter past, the servant-girls, having lighted their fires, and put the kettle on to boil for breakfast, are ostensibly busy in sweeping the pathways of the small front-gardens, but are actually enjoying a simultaneous gossip together over the garden railings—a fleeting pleasure, which must be nipped in the bud, because master goes to town at half-past eight, and his boots are not yet cleaned, or his breakfast prepared. Now the bedroom-bell rings, which means hot water; and this is no sooner up, than mistress is down, and breakfast is laid in the parlour. At a quarter before eight, the eggs are boiled, and the bacon toasted, and the first serious business of the day is in course of transaction. Mr Jones of No. 9, Mr Robinson of No. 10, and Mr Brown of No. 11, are bound to be at their several posts in the city at nine o'clock; and having swallowed a hasty breakfast, they may be seen, before half-past eight has chimed, walking up and down the terrace chatting together, and wondering whether 'that Smith,' as usual, means to keep the omnibus waiting this morning, or whether he will come forth in time. Precisely as the half hour strikes, the tin horn of the omnibus sounds its shrill blast, and the vehicle is seen rattling round the corner, stopping one moment at No. 28, to take up Mr Johnson. On it comes, with a fresh blast, to where the commercial trio are waiting for it; out rushes Smith, wiping his mouth, and the 'bus,' swallowing up the whole four, rumbles and trumpets on to take up Thompson, Jackson, and Richardson, who, cigars in mouth, are waiting at a distance of forty paces off to ascend the roof. An hour later, a second omnibus comes by on the same benevolent errand, for the accommodation of those gentlemen, more favoured by fortune, who are not expected to be at the post of business until the hour of ten. As Our Terrace does not stand in a direct omnibus route, these are all the 'buses' that will pass in the course of the day. The gentlemen whom they convey every morning to town are regular customers, and the vehicles diverge from their regular course in order to pick them up at their own doors.

About half-past nine, or from that to a quarter to ten, comes the postman with his first delivery of letters for the day. Our Terrace is the most toilsome part of his beat, for having to serve both sides of the way, his progress is very like that of a ship at sea sailing against the wind. R'tat he goes on our side, then down he jumps into the road—B'bang on the other side—tacks about again, and serves the terrace—off again, and serves the villas, and so on till he has fairly epistolised both sides of the way, and vanished round the corner. The vision of his gold band and red collar is anxiously looked for in the morning by many a fair face, which a watchful observer may see furtively peering through the drawing-room window-curtains. After he has departed, and the well-to-do merchants and employers who reside in the villas opposite have had time to look over their correspondence, come sundry neat turn-outs from the stables and coach-houses in the rear of the villas: a light, high gig, drawn by a frisky grey, into which leaps young Oversea the shipbroker—a comfortable, cushioned four-wheel drawn by a pair of bay ponies, into which old Discount climbs heavily, followed perhaps by his two daughters, bound on a shopping-visit to the city—and a spicy-looking, rattling trap, with a pawing horse, which has a decided objection to standing still, for Mr Goadall, the wealthy cattle-drover. These, with other vehicles of less note, all roll off the ground by a quarter after ten o'clock or so; and the ladies and their servants, with some few exceptions, are left in undisputed possession of home, while not a footfall of man or beast is heard in the sunshiny quiet of the street.

The quiet, however, is broken before long by a peculiar and suggestive cry. We do not hear it yet ourselves, but Stalker, our black cat and familiar, has caught the well-known accents, and with a characteristic crooning noise, and a stiff, perpendicular erection of tail, he sidles towards the door, demanding, as plainly as possible, to be let out. Yes, it is the cats-meat man. 'Ca' me-e-et—me-yet—me-e-yet!' fills the morning air, and arouses exactly thirty responsive feline voices—for there is a cat to every house—and points thirty aspiring tails to the zenith. As many hungry tabbies, sables, and tortoise-shells as can get out of doors, are trooping together with arched backs upon the pavement, following the little pony-cart, the cats' commissariat equipage, and each one, anxious for his daily allowance, contributing most musically his quota to the general concert. We do not know how it is, but the cats-meat man is the most unerring and punctual of all those peripatetic functionaries who undertake to cater for the consumption of the public. The baker, the butcher, the grocer, the butterman, the fishmonger, and the coster, occasionally forget your necessities, or omit to call for your orders—the cats-meat man never. Other traders, too, dispense their stock by a sliding-scale, and are sometimes out of stock altogether: Pussy's provider, on the contrary, sticks to one price from year's end to year's end, and never, in the memory of the oldest Grimalkin, was known to disappoint a customer. A half-penny for a cat's breakfast has been the regulation-price ever since the horses of the metropolis began to submit to the boiling process for the benefit of the feline race.

By the time the cats have retired to growl over their allowance in private, the daily succession of nomadic industrials begin to lift up their voices, and to defile slowly along Our Terrace, stopping now and then to execute a job or effect a sale when an opportunity presents itself. Our limits will not allow us to notice them all, but we must devote a few paragraphs to those without whom our picture would be incomplete.

First comes an ingenious lass of two or three-and-twenty, with a flaming red shawl, pink ribbons in her bonnet, and the hue of health on a rather saucy face. She carries a large basket on her left arm, and in her right hand she displays to general admiration a gorgeous group of flowers, fashioned twice the size of life, from tissue-paper of various colours. She lifts up her voice occasionally as she marches slowly along, singing, in a clear accent: 'Flowers—ornamental papers for the stove—flowers! paper-flowers!' She is the accredited herald of summer—a phenomenon, this year, of very late appearance. We should have seen her six weeks ago, if the summer had not declined to appear at the usual season. She is the gaudy, party-coloured ephemera of street commerce, and will disappear from view in a fortnight's time, to be seen no more until the opening summer of '53. Her wares, which are manufactured with much taste, and with an eye to the harmony of colours, are in much request among the genteel housewives of the suburbs. They are exceedingly cheap, considering the skill which must be applied in their construction. They are all the work of her own hands, and have occupied her time and swallowed up her capital for some months past. She enjoys almost a monopoly in her art, and is not to be beaten down in the price of her goods. She knows their value, and is more independent than an artist dares to be in the presence of a patron. Her productions are a pleasant summer substitute for the cheerful fire of winter; and it is perhaps well for her that, before the close of autumn, the faded hues of the flowers, and the harbour they afford to dust, will convert them into waste paper, in spite of all the care that may be taken to preserve them.

Paper Poll, as the servants call her, is hardly out of sight, and not out of hearing, when a young fellow and his wife come clattering along the pavement, appealing to all who may require their good offices in the matter of chair-mending. The man is built up in a sort of cage-work of chairs stuck about his head and shoulders, and his dirty phiz is only half visible through a kind of grill of legs and cross-bars. These are partly commissions which, having executed at home, he is carrying to their several owners. But as everybody does not choose to trust him away with property, he is ready to execute orders on the spot; and to this end his wife accompanies him on his rounds. She is loaded with a small bag of tools suspended at her waist, and a plentiful stock of split-cane under one arm. He will weave a new cane-seat to an old chair for 9d., and he will set down his load and do it before your eyes in your own garden, if you prefer that to intrusting him with it; that is, he will make the bargain, and his wife will weave the seat under his supervision, unless there happen to be two to be repaired, when husband and wife will work together. We have noticed that it is a very silent operation, that of weaving chair-bottoms; and that though the couple may be seated for an hour and more together rapidly plying the flexible canes, they never exchange a word with each other till the task is accomplished. Sometimes the wife is left at a customer's door working alone, while the husband wanders further on in search of other employment, returning by the time she has finished her task. But there are no chairs to mend this morning on Our Terrace, and our bamboo friends may jog on their way.

Now resounds from a distance the cry of 'All a-growin' an' a-blowin'—all a-blowin', a-blowin' here!' and in a few minutes the travelling florist makes his appearance, driving before him a broad-surfaced handcart, loaded in profusion with exquisite flowers of all hues, in full bloom, and, to all appearance, thriving famously. It may happen, however, as it has happened to us, that the blossoms now so vigorous and blooming, may all drop off on the second or third day; and the naked plant, after making a sprawling and almost successful attempt to reach the ceiling for a week or so, shall become suddenly sapless and withered, the emblem of a broken-down and emaciated sot—and, what is more, ruined from the self-same cause, an overdose of stimulating fluid. It may happen, on the other hand, that the plant shall have suffered no trick of the gardener's trade, and shall bloom fairly to the end of its natural term. The commerce in blossoming flowers is one of the most uncertain and dangerous speculations in which the small street-traders of London can engage. When carried on under favourable circumstances, it is one of the most profitable, the demand for flowers being constant and increasing; but the whole stock-in-trade of a small perambulating capitalist may be ruined by a shower of rain, which will spoil their appearance for the market, and prevent his selling them before they are overblown. Further, as few of these dealers have any means of housing this kind of stock safely during the night, they are often compelled to part with them, after an unfavourable day, at less than prime cost, to prevent a total loss. Still, there are never wanting men of a speculative turn of mind, and the cry of 'All a-blowin' an' a-growin'' resounds through the streets as long as the season supplies flowers to grow and to blow.

The flower-merchant wheels off, having left a good sprinkling of geraniums in our neighbours' windows; and his cousin-german, 'the graveller,' comes crawling after him, with his cart and stout horse in the middle of the road, while he walks on one side of the pavement, and his assistant on the other. This fellow is rather a singular character, and one that is to be met with probably nowhere upon the face of the earth but in the suburbs of London. He is, *par excellence*, the exponent of a feeling which pervades the popular mind in the metropolis on the subject of the duty which respectable people owe to respectability. It is impossible for a housekeeper in a neighbourhood having any claims to gentility, to escape the recognition of this feeling in the lower class of industrials. If you have a broken window in the front of your house, the travelling glazier thinks, to use his own expression, that *you have a right* to have it repaired, and therefore that he, having discovered the fracture, has a right to the job of mending it. If your bell-handle is out of order or broken off, the travelling bellman thinks he has a right to repair it, and bores you, in fact, until you commission him to do so—and so on. In the same manner, and on the same principle, so soon as the fine weather sets in, and the front-gardens begin to look gay, the graveller loads his cart with gravel, and shouldering his spade, crawls leisurely through the suburbs with his companion, peering into every garden; and wherever he sees that the walks are grown dingy or moss-grown, he knocks boldly at the door, and demands to be set to work in mending your ways. The best thing you can do is to make the bargain and employ him at once; if not, he will be round again to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, and bore you into consenting at last. You live in a respectable house, and you *have a right* to keep your garden in a respectable condition—and the graveller is determined that you shall do so: has he not brought gravel to the door on purpose? it will cost you but a shilling or two. Thus he lays down the law in his own mind; and sooner or later, as sure as fate, he lays down the gravel in your garden.

While the graveller is patting down the pathway round Robinson's flower-bed, we hear the well-known cry of a countryman whom we have known any time these ten years, and who, with his wife by his side, has perambulated the suburbs for the best part of his life. He has taken upon himself the patronage of the laundry department, and he shoulders a fagot of clothes-poles, ten feet long, with forked extremities, all freshly cut from the forest. Coils of new rope for drying are hanging upon his arm, and his wife carries a basket well stocked with clothes-pins of a superior description, manufactured by themselves. The cry of 'Clo'-pole-line-pins' is one long familiar to the neighbourhood; and as this honest couple have earned a good reputation by a long course of civility and probity, they enjoy the advantage of a pretty extensive connection. Their perambulations are confined to the suburbs, and it is a question if they ever enter London proper from one year's end to another. It is of no use to carry clothes-poles and drying-lines where there are no conveniences for washing and drying.

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