

The Yellow Book

A Criticism of Volume I

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I—The Literature

THE Editor and Publishers of THE YELLOW BOOK, who seem to know the value of originality in all things, have conceived the entirely novel idea of publishing in the current number of their quarterly, a review in two parts of the number immediately preceding it, one part to deal with the literature, and another to criticise the illustrations.

I notice that on the cover of THE YELLOW BOOK the literary contributions are described simply as "Letterpress." This seems rather unfortunate, because "letterpress" is usually understood to mean an inferior kind of writing, which is merely an accompaniment to something else, such as engravings, or even maps. Now, in THE YELLOW BOOK the principle seems to be that one kind of contribution should *not* be made subordinate to another; the drawings and the writings are, in fact, independent. Certainly the writings are composed without the slightest pre-occupation concerning the work of the graphic artists, and the draughtsmen do not illustrate the inventions of the scribes. This independence

ence of the two arts is favourable to excellence in both, besides making the business of the Editor much easier, and giving him more liberty of choice.

The literary contributions include poetry, fiction, short dramatic scenes, and one or two essays. The Editor evidently attaches much greater importance to creative than to critical literature, in which he is unquestionably right, provided only that the work which claims to be creative is inspired by a true genius for invention. The admission of poetry in more than usual quantity does not surprise us, when we reflect that THE YELLOW BOOK is issued by a publishing house which has done more than any other for the encouragement of modern verse. It is the custom to profess contempt for minor poets, and all versifiers of our time except Tennyson and Swinburne are classed as minor poets by critics who shrink from the effort of reading metrical compositions. The truth is that poetry and painting are much more nearly on a level in this respect than people are willing to admit. Many a painter and many a poet has delicate perceptions and a cultivated taste without the gigantic creative force that is necessary to greatness in his art.

Mr. Le Gallienne's "Tree-Worship" is full of the sylvan sense, the delight in that forest life which we can scarcely help believing to be conscious. It contains some perfect stanzas and some magnificent verses. As a stanza nothing can be more perfect than the fourth on page 58, and the fourth on the preceding page begins with a rarely powerful line. The only weak points in the poem are a few places in which even poetic truth has not been perfectly observed. For example, in the first line on page 58, the heart of the tree is spoken of as being remarkable for its softness, a new and unexpected characteristic in heart of oak. On the following page the tree is described as a green and welcome

"coast"

“coast” to the sea of air. No single tree has extent enough to be a coast of the air-ocean ; at most it is but a tiny green islet therein. In the last stanza but one Mr. Le Gallienne speaks of “the roar of sap.” This conveys the idea of a noisy torrent, whereas the marvel of sap is that it is steadily forced upwards through a mass of wood by a quietly powerful pressure. I dislike the fallacious theology of the last stanza as being neither scientific nor poetical. Mr. Benson’s little poem, *Δαίμωνιζόμενος*, is lightly and cleverly versified, and tells the story of a change of temper, almost of nature, in very few words. The note of Mr. Watson’s two sonnets is profoundly serious, even solemn, and the workmanship firm and strong ; the reader may observe, in the second sonnet, the careful preparation for the last line and the force with which it strikes upon the ear. Surely there is nothing frivolous or fugitive in such poetry as this ! I regret the publication of “Stella Maris,” by Mr. Arthur Symons ; the choice of the title is in itself offensive. It is taken from one of the most beautiful hymns to the Holy Virgin (*Ave, maris stella !*), and applied to a London street-walker, as a star in the dark sea of urban life. We know that the younger poets make art independent of morals, and certainly the two have no necessary connection ; but why should poetic art be employed to celebrate common fornication ? Rossetti’s “Jenny” set the example, diffusely enough.

The two poems by Mr. Edmund Gosse, “Alere Flammam” and “A Dream of November,” have each the great quality of perfect unity. The first is simpler and less fanciful than the second. Both in thought and execution it reminds me strongly of Matthew Arnold. Whether there has been any conscious imitation or not, “Alere Flammam” is pervaded by what is best in the classical spirit. Mr. John Davidson’s two songs are sketches in town and country, impressionist sketches well done in
a laconic

a laconic and suggestive fashion. Mr. Davidson has a good right to maledict "Elkin Mathews & John Lane" for having revived the detestable old custom of printing catchwords at the lower corner of the page. The reader has just received the full impression of the London scene, when he is disturbed by the isolated word FOXES, which destroys the impression and puzzles him. London streets are not, surely, very favourable to foxes! He then turns the page and finds that the word is the first in the rural poem which follows. How Tennyson would have growled if the printer had put the name of some intrusive beast at the foot of one of his poems! Even in prose the custom is still intolerable; it makes one read the word twice over as thus (pp. 159, 60), "Why doesn't the wretched publisher publisher bring it out!"

We find some further poetry in Mr. Richard Garnett's translations from Luigi Tansillo. Not having access just now to the original Italian, I cannot answer for their fidelity, but they are worth reading, even in English, and soundly versified.

It is high time to speak of the prose. The essays are "A Defence of Cosmetics," by Mr. Max Beerbohm, and "Reticence in Literature," by Mr. Arthur Waugh. I notice that a critic in the *New York Nation* says that the Whistlerian affectations of Mr. Beerbohm are particularly intolerable. I understood his essay to be merely a *jeu d'esprit*, and found that it amused me, though the tastes and opinions ingeniously expressed in it are precisely the opposite of my own. Mr. Beerbohm is (or pretends to be) entirely on the side of artifice against nature. The difficulty is to determine what *is* nature. The easiest and most "natural" manners of a perfect English lady are the result of art, and of a more advanced art than that indicated by more ceremonious manners. Mr. Beerbohm says that women in the time of Dickens appear to have been utterly natural in their conduct, "flighty, gushing, blushing, fainting,

fainting, giggling, and shaking their curls." Much of that conduct may have been as artificial as the curls themselves, and assumed only to attract attention. Ladies used to faint on the slightest pretext, not because it was natural but because it was the fashion; when it ceased to be the fashion they abandoned the practice. Mr. Waugh's essay on "Reticence in Literature" is written more seriously, and is not intended to amuse. He defends the principle of reticence, but the only sanction that he finds for it is a temporary authority imposed by the changing taste of the age. We are consequently never sure of any permanent law that will enforce any reticence whatever. A good proof of the extreme laxity of the present taste is that Mr. Waugh himself has been able to print at length three of the most grossly sensual stanzas in Mr. Swinburne's "Dolores." Reticence, however, is not concerned only with sexual matters. There is, for instance, a flagrant want of reticence in the lower political press of France and America, and the same violent kind of writing, often going as far beyond truth as beyond decency, is beginning to be imitated in England. One rule holds good universally; all high art is reticent, *e.g.*, in Dante's admirable way of telling the story of Francesca through her own lips.

Mr. Henry James, in "The Death of the Lion," shows his usual elegance of style, and a kind of humour which, though light enough on the surface, has its profound pathos. It is absolutely essential, in a short story, to be able to characterise people and things in a very few words. Mr. James has this talent, as for example in his description of the ducal seat at Bigwood: "very grand and frigid, all marble and precedence." We know Bigwood, after that, as if we had been there and have no desire to go. So of the Princess: "She has been told everything in the world and has never perceived anything, and the *echoes of her education*," etc., p. 42. The

moral of the story is the vanity and shallowness of the world's professed admiration for men of letters, and the evil, to them, or going out of their way to suck the sugar-plums of praise. The next story, "Irremediable," shows the consequences of marrying a vulgar and ignorant girl in the hope of improving her, the difficulty being that she declines to be improved. The situation is powerfully described, especially the last scene in the repulsive, disorderly little home. The most effective touch reveals Willoughby's constant vexation because his vulgar wife "never did any one mortal thing efficiently or well," just the opposite of the constant pleasure that clever active women give us by their neat and rapid skill. "The Dedication," by Mr. Fred Simpson, is a dramatic representation of the conflict between ambition and love—not that the love on the man's side is very earnest, or the conflict in his mind very painful, as ambition wins the day only too easily when Lucy is thrown over. "The Fool's Hour," by Mr. Hobbes and Mr. George Moore, is a slight little drama founded on the idea that youth must amuse itself in its own way, and cannot be always tied to its mamma's apron-strings. It is rather French than English in the assumption that youth must of necessity resort to theatres and actresses. Of the two sketches by Mr. Harland, that on white mice is clever as a supposed reminiscence of early boyhood, but rather long for its subject, the other, "A Broken Looking-Glass," is a powerful little picture of the dismal end of an old bachelor who confesses to himself that his life has been a failure, equally on the sides of ambition and enjoyment. One of my friends tells me that it is impossible for a bachelor to be happy, yet he may invest money in the Funds! In Mr. Crackanthorpe's "Modern Melodrama," he describes for us the first sensations of a girl when she sees death in the near future. It is pathetic, tragical, life-like in language, with the defects

defects of character and style that belong to a close representation of nature. "A Lost Masterpiece," by George Egerton, is not so interesting as the author's "Keynotes," though it shows the same qualities of style. The subject is too unfruitful, merely a literary disappointment, because a bright idea has been chased away. "A Sentimental Cellar," by Mr. George Saintsbury, written in imitation of the essayists of the eighteenth century, associates the wines in a cellar with the loves and friendships of their owner. To others the vinous treasures would be "good wine and nothing more"; to their present owner they are "a casket of magic liquors," a museum in which he lives over again "the vanished life of the past." The true French bookless *bourgeois* often calls his cellar his *bibliothèque*, meaning that he values its lore as preferable to that of scholarship; but Mr. Saintsbury's Falernianus associates his wines with sentiment rather than with knowledge.

On the whole, the literature in the first number of THE YELLOW BOOK is adequately representative of the modern English literary mind, both in the observation of reality and in style. It is, as I say, really literature and not letterpress. I rather regret, for my own part, the general brevity of the pieces which restricts them to the limits of the sketch, especially as the stories cannot be continued after the too long interval of three months. As to this, the publishers know their own business best, and are probably aware that the attention of the general public, though easily attracted, is even more easily fatigued.

II—The Illustrations

ON being asked to undertake the second part of this critical article, I accepted because one has so rarely an opportunity of saying anything about works of art to which the reader can quite easily refer. To review an exhibition of pictures in London or Paris is satisfactory only when the writer imagines himself to be addressing readers who have visited it, and are likely to visit it again. When an illustration appears in one of the art periodicals, it may be accompanied by a note that adds something to its interest, but no one expects such a note to be really critical. In the present instance, on the contrary, we are asked to say what we think, without reserve, and as we have had nothing to do with the choice of the contributors, and have not any interest in the sale of the periodical, there is no reason why we should not.

To begin with the cover. The publishers decided not to have any ornament beyond the decorative element in the figure design which is to be changed for every new number. What is permanent in the design remains, therefore, of an extreme simplicity and does not attract attention. The yellow colour adopted is glaring, and from the æsthetic point of view not so good as a quiet mixed tint might have been; however, it gives a title to the publication and associates itself so perfectly with the title that it has a sufficient *raison d'être*, whilst it contrasts most effectively with black. Though white is lighter than any yellow, it has not the same active and stimulating quality. The drawing of the masquers is merely one of Mr. Aubrey Beardsley's fancies and has no particular signification. We see a plump and merry lady laughing
boisterously

boisterously whilst she seems to be followed by a man who gazes intently upon the beauties of her shoulder. It is not to be classed amongst the finest of Mr. Beardsley's designs, but it shows some of his qualities, especially his extreme economy of means. So does the smaller drawing on the back or the volume, which is a fair example of his ready and various invention. See how the candle-flame is blown a little to one side, how the candle gutters on that side, and how the smoke is affected by the gust of air. Observe, too, the contrasts between the faces, not that they are attractive faces. There seems to be a peculiar tendency in Mr. Beardsley's mind to the representation of types without intellect and without morals. Some of the most dreadful faces in all art are to be found in the illustrations (full of exquisite ornamental invention) to Mr. Oscar Wilde's "Salome." We have two unpleasant ones here in "l'Éducation Sentimentale." There is distinctly a sort of corruption in Mr. Beardsley's art so far as its human element is concerned, but not at all in its artistic qualities, which show the perfection of discipline, of self-control, and of thoughtful deliberation at the very moment of invention. Certainly he is a man of genius, and perhaps, as he is still very young, we may hope that when he has expressed his present mood completely, he may turn his thoughts into another channel and see a better side of human life. There is, of course, nothing to be said against the lady who is touching the piano on the title-page of *THE YELLOW BOOK*, nor against the portrait of Mrs. Patrick Campbell opposite page 126, except that she reminds one of a giraffe. It is curious how the idea of extraordinary height is conveyed in this drawing without a single object for comparison. I notice in Mr. Beardsley's work a persistent tendency to elongation; for instance, in the keys of the piano on the title-page which in their perspective look fifteen inches long. He has a habit, too, of making faces small and head-dresses enormous.

mous. The rarity of beauty in his faces seems in contradiction with his exquisite sense of beauty in curving lines, and the singular grace as well as rich invention of his ornaments. He can, however, refuse himself the pleasure of such invention when he wants to produce a discouraging effect upon the mind. See, for instance, the oppressive plainness of the architecture in the background to the dismal "Night Piece."

It is well known that the President of the Royal Academy, unlike most English painters, is in the habit of making studies. In his case these studies are uniformly in black and white chalk on brown paper. Two of them are reproduced in *THE YELLOW BOOK*, one being for drapery, and the other for the nude form moving in a joyous dance with a light indication of drapery that conceals nothing. The latter is a rapid sketch of an intention and is full of life both in attitude and execution, the other is still and statuesque. Sir Frederic is a model to all artists in one very rare virtue, that of submitting himself patiently, in his age, to the same discipline which strengthened him in youth.

I find a curious and remarkable drawing by Mr. Pennell of that strangely romantic place Le Puy en Velay, whose rocks are crowned with towers or colossal statues, whilst houses cluster at their feet. The subject is dealt with rather in the spirit of Dürer, but with a more supple and more modern kind of skill. It is topography, though probably with considerable artistic liberty. I notice one of Dürer's licences in tonic relations. The sky, though the sun is setting (or rising) is made darker than the hills against it, and darker even than the two remoter masses of rock which come between us and the distance. The trees, too, are shaded capriciously, some poplars in the middle distance being quite dark whilst nearer trees are left without shade or local colour. In a word, the tonality is simply arbitrary, and in this kind of drawing it matters

matters very little. Mr. Pennell has given us a delightful bit of artistic topography showing the strange beauty of a place that he always loves and remembers.

Mr. Sickert contributed two drawings. "The Old Oxford Music Hall" has some very good qualities, especially the most important quality of all, that of making us feel as if we were there. The singer on the stage (whose attitude has been very closely observed) is strongly lighted by convergent rays. According to my recollection the rays themselves are much more visible in reality than they are here, but it is possible that the artist may have intentionally subdued their brightness in order to enhance that of the figure itself. The musicians and others are good, except that they are too small, if the singing girl (considering her distance) is to be taken as the standard of comparison. The pen-sketch of "A Lady Reading" is not so satisfactory. I know, of course, that it is offered only as a very slight and rapid sketch, and that it is impossible, even for a Rembrandt, to draw accurately in a hurry, but there is a formlessness in some important parts of this sketch (the hands, for instance) which makes it almost without interest for me. It is essentially painter's pen work, and does not show any special mastery of pen and ink.

The very definite pen-drawing by Mr. Housman called "The Reflected Faun" is open to the objection that the reflections in the water are drawn with the same hardness as the birds and faun in the air. The plain truth is that the style adopted, which in its own way is as legitimate as any other, does not permit the artist to represent the natural appearance of water. This kind of pen-drawing is founded on early wood-engraving which filled the whole space with decorative work, even to the four corners.

Mr. Rothenstein is a modern of the moderns. His two slight portrait-sketches are natural and easy, and there is much life in the

"Portrait

“Portrait of a Gentleman.” The “Portrait of a Lady,” by Mr. Furse, is of a much higher order. It has a noble gravity, and it shows a severity of taste not common in the portraiture of our time ; it is essentially a distinguished work. Mr. Nettleship gives us an ideal portrait of Minos, not in his earthly life, as king of Crete, but in his infernal capacity as supreme judge of the dead. The face is certainly awful enough and implacable :

Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia :
Esamina le colpe nell' entrata ;
Giudica e manda, secondo ch'avvinghia.

The book-plate designed by Mr. Beardsley for Dr. Propert has the usual qualities of the inventor. It seems to tell a tale of hopeless love. The other book-plate, by Mr. Anning Bell, is remarkable for its pretty and ingenious employment of heraldry which so easily becomes mechanical when the draughtsman is not an artist.

On the whole, these illustrations decidedly pre-suppose real artistic culture in the public. They do not condescend in any way to what might be guessed at as the popular taste. I notice that the Editor and Publishers have a tendency to look to young men of ability for assistance in their enterprise, though they accept the criticism of those who now belong to a preceding generation.