

CONTEMPORARY RECORD.

ME JUDICE.

The publishing season of 1892 is memorable for the commercial success of a biographical and philosophical book, *The History of David Grieve*: for the reluctantly allowed literary and library success of a great work of fiction, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: and for the disastrous failure of the latest production of a great poet, *The Sisters*. Of these, Mrs. Humphry Ward's novel is indeed, as has been claimed, monumental. In this country monuments are erected to the memory of the departed only. The powerful and beautiful and eminently significant romance by Mr. Thomas Hardy has one drawback—for the mentally and spiritually anaemic: it is sane, vigorous, full-blooded, robust, with the pulse of indomitable youth. It is a book to read, to re-read, to ponder, to be proud of. Its author has at last won the bâton of a Field-Marshal in the army of contemporary novelists. Mr. Swinburne, on the other hand, has given a further and now serious impetus to the retrograde movement of his great reputation. He is a poet of, at his best, so rare and high a genius that many readers, during perusal of *The Sisters*, will be tempted to believe in the Doppelgänger legend. Who is Mr. Swinburne's double? It is an undesirable co-partnery. The lesser man, who had already satisfied us of his inability to sustain the honour done him, should now retire. Mr. Swinburne has played double-dummy with him long enough.

* *

The Sisters is the production of a tamed Elizabethan. It has fine things that might almost be written by Webster, or at least by Cyril Tournear, if one or other of these dramatists be thought of as a contemporary, and maugre that special quality of spiritual audacity and intellectual bravura so characteristic of each, and that Mr. Swinburne himself at one time possessed. On the other hand, it has pages of drawing-room realism, of "Friendship's-Offering" sentiment, of a dulness unequalled by anything in "the new humour." It has passages that would make love impossible of continu-

ance: lovers can understand "speaking silence" but not diction where cherished commonplaces are choked in struggling rhetoric. There are other passages that I recommend to the tender mercies of the University Extension-Lecturer. He can then lay horrid pitfalls for the unwary, for who among them will be able to say if the given excerpts be execrable verse or villainous prose? There are lines, alas, which excruciate the ear: lines worthy of Byron at his worst, of a fibrelessness so perverse, of so maladroit a turn, that the ear of the metricist revolts. And yet Mr. Swinburne is a prince of his craft in knowledge and skill! No: it is the mysterious double who hath done this thing. It is a bitter thing to tell a poet that we prefer his prose, but even a recantatory essay on Byron or Whitman—the two magnificent derelict comets of modern poetry whose tails have been so carefully pulled by Mr. Swinburne while under the impression that he was grappling with the luminaries in front—would be preferable to *The Sisters*. For no one need read Mr. Swinburne the critic of modern men, but everyone must read Mr. Swinburne the poet.

* *

If *The Sisters* be a poor play it contains, besides many beautiful passages, lyrical interludes of surpassing grace. To read the lyric "Love and Sorrow met in May" is to rejoice that we have a great poet still among us. When this drama itself is known only of rust and the moth, the flawless lyric it enshrines shall have put on immortality as a garment.

* *

The half-year that is over has been further noteworthy for two new books by Mr. George Meredith: if, indeed, the reprint of his superb *Modern Love*, with later additions, can be called a new book. His novel, *One of Our Conquerors*, has sown discord among the faithful. Enthusiasts call it manna: the cavillers will have it that it is a St. John's feast with a multiplicity of hard locusts to a small benefice of wild honey. One can certainly discern in it George Meredith at his best: it is easier, however, to find him in his least winsome aspect. He is the electric light among contemporary illuminators of our darkness.

* * *

The Poet Laureate is what no other like dignitary has been: the most consummate poetic artist of his time. He is Sovereign of the Victorians. But he is not a dramatist, though he can sometimes write dramatically. His *Foresters* is a lovely pastoral, with some happy songs; but the England of Robin Hood is just what we do *not* find reflected in its exquisitely polished mirror. This drama is even more a Court-of-Victoria-fin-de-siècle rendering of the wild life it nominally represents than the "Idyls of the King" are of the Arthurian past. As a stage play *The Foresters* is eminently suited to please British and American audiences, having neither intensity of vision, overmastery of passion, vigour of dialogue, nor convincing verisimilitude.

* * *

Lord Lytton, who lisped in his father's fiction, died a writer of verse. He was a worthy private citizen; as a public man, an ornamental Imperialist; as a diplomatist, a sign-post to warn new-comers to take the other way. He was saved from being a bad Oriental by being an unconventional Occidental.

As a poet, he was a worthy son of his father.

* * *

A greater than many Lyttons passed away in the person of Walt Whitman. This great pioneer of a new literature has so many faults in the view of most of his contemporaries that they cannot discern the volcano beneath the scoriæ. Let us defy mixt metaphors, and add that we believe those who come after us will look upon him as the Janitor of the New House Beautiful. Meanwhile all Whitmaniacs (the courteous appellation is not ours) must rejoice in the convincing, if unconscious, tribute paid with so much delicacy and graciousness by the writer of a certain famous *Athenæum* critique.

* * *

Mr. Hall Caine has written *The Scapegoat*. He has also re-written it. The experiment reflects credit on him as a conscientious workman, but is in other respects an awful example to set to the young. Horrible possibilities are suggested. Burke and Hare will be outdone in the resurrecting business. Mudie will have to start duplicate shelves,

the upper marked *As they Were*, the lower *As they Are*. The dead will arise and walk in a new ghastliness.

* * *
The Naulahka proves that two clever men can legally procure an abortion.

* * *
 Mr. Mallock's *Human Document* should be filed at once. It can then be put away.

* * *
 In Robert Louis Stevenson's new books, *Across the Plains* and *The Wrecker*, there are wells of pure delight. The sunshine of genius is in both, though the former is but a series of collected papers and the latter a romance of adventure. The delight of these books cancels the deep disappointment of the "South-Sea Letters." There are pages of "The Lantern-Bearers" and "Fontainebleau" which ought to be committed to memory by every aspirant in the literary life.

* * *
 The novel of the year, in France—a year given over to strange aberrations from the well-defined "stream of tendency" of the French mind, from a lurid colour-study by the Flemish-Parisian Huysmans to the serene cold-bloodedness of Maurice Barrès, or the scientific romancing of J. H. Rosny—is Zola's recently published *La Débâcle*. It should be read not only as perhaps the most mature and splendid effort of a great writer—a great writer who has reached the Temple of Fame through seas of mud, and, unfortunately, has brought a good deal with him, even to the white steps of the portico; but also as a work likely to have a remarkable effect on the political temper and ideals of the French people. *La Débâcle* may prove to be a factor of supreme international significance, in the relations of France and Germany. In this country, even, it will attract almost as much attention as the marriage of a duke or the misdemeanour of an actress.

* * *
 Maurice Maeterlinck—who stabbed himself with a bodkin in *Les Sept Princesses*—has, in *Pelléas et Melisande*, opened a vein. There is just a chance it is not an artery.

* * *
 Next month a word to *les jeunes* here. W. H. B.