

SELBY'S THEOLOGY OF MODERN FICTION.

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Shortly after the appearance of Mr. Selby's volume of sermons, "The Imperfect Angel," the present occupant of the presidential chair of the Wesleyan Conference, England, said "that Methodism had now in her midst one of the best sermon-makers in modern Christendom." The logical argument, thorough analysis, and felicitous illustration apparent in that volume and subsequent work, fully justify the praise given, not by Mr. Watkinson alone, but the religious press generally.

It was conceded that when Mr. Selby was appointed to deliver the twenty-sixth Fernley lecture at Liverpool, on "The Theology of Modern Fiction," that the choice was a wise one, and that the subject chosen would receive careful and thorough handling from one who is attaining a distinguished place in the world of letters. The work under discussion shows how well grounded was the anticipation. It indicates wide reading, and a keen insight into the problems that modern fiction presents.

The discussion of the work of such authors as George Eliot, George Macdonald, and Mark Rutherford throw us back to seek a good working definition of a novel; and whether that "bete noir" of modern fiction—the theological novel—be not illegitimate under that heading.

A novel we take to be primarily a representation of life. "It gives us pen-and-ink sketches of men and women, set upon a background of circumstance;" it shows us the conflicts and the passions, the pains and the pleasures, the duties and the joys of life; and how these affect character, and

how character modifies circumstances. It takes a bit out of the world's life, and, clothing it in a drapery of imagination, sets it in a framework of language. It is, or ought to be, a poem of life, moving us to laughter or to tears, because it is akin to poetry, in that it is a creation of the imagination. Its theme is man; its aim to show us the throbbing life of humanity. I take it that the novel must be a novel, not an essay, historical, political, or theological, with a thin disguise of story, a species of literary jam by means of which the many-headed public may be induced to swallow the intellectual pill.

The true novel is a story, a work of the imagination. The story must not be a peg on which to hang history or theology. Yet this is just what is being done by a large number of fiction-writers who are making theology the mainspring of their books, setting it in a very thin casing of story.

In the limits of such a paper as this there is not time to enter into a lengthy criticism of this species of literature, but this perhaps ought to be said, that on the ethical side the theological novelist has no justification for the manner in which he appeals for votes and seeks disciples among those who are neither entitled to vote or qualified to make a decision. For the public, for whom the novel is written, is, for the most part, profoundly ignorant of even the A B C of theology, while of higher criticism it knows little and cares less.

Now, thanks to the theological novel, this has become the small talk of the drawing-room, the babble of the street corners, the