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THE "BAPTISM" OF THE NOVEL.



TIME was when the intellectual field was occupied almost solely by philosophy and poetry, but times have changed, and to-day we find the natural sciences bidding fair to outstrip philosophy, while poetry is gradually giving place to that more popular form of literature—the novel. Philosophy certainly will never for any of length time be superseded by the natural sciences, for that which is founded on true principles can never die. But it is exceedingly doubtful if this much can be said for poetry; in fact, everything seems to point to its decline, and there are those who have gone so far as to say that the rhyming lines have already yielded to fiction. At any rate, it is certain that of the two forms of literature, the latter is by far the more popular at the present time.

This statement may seem somewhat unpleasant to our poetical friends who are wont to consider the nation's songsters the nation's moulders; or, again, it may be unpalatable to those who are opposed to the novel on principle. But, let it be remembered that the intention is not to discuss the relative merits of poetry and fiction; it is not claimed that poetry wields a bad influence, but rather that at the present time it wields no appreciable influence; and, again, it is not claimed that the novel always has a good influence, but only that it has *an* influence. And not only does it now exert the influence which formerly belonged to poetry, but it has a far broader field; for, whereas poetry was chiefly confined to the upper classes, the novel finds its way to all grades of society. The rich use it to while away the day, the poor to pass their leisure

hours; it finds a place in the libraries of the refined and educated, as well as in the homes of the more unlearned; it is the favorite reading at the sea-side while it finds a ready market in our factory-towns. In a word, it is the people's literature; and whatever the people read, whether light or profound, learned or unlearned, must sooner or later have its effect. Now, whether this effect, up to the present time, has been for good or evil, might be difficult to say. But granting that it has been decidedly for evil, which, of course, is not the fault of the novel, yet, the fact remains that people will read, and they will read the novel; and since this is so, we must accept the inevitable, and use our influence to purge it of whatever might prove detrimental to faith and morals. Some one has well said that literature, the great possession of modern times, needs to be "baptized" before it can do service to the Church. This is especially true of the novel; for thus and thus only, can it be made one of the great influences for good.

And particularly in this country where everybody reads and everybody claims the right of thinking for himself, should the novel receive this "baptism," for tendencies producing many deplorable effects, prominent among which is that of indifference to all religion, have crept into it, thus making it a source of the greatest danger to society. This indifference, occasionally found among Catholics, has frequently been attributed to public school education; but it is probable that the novel which is so generally read, has had an equal, if not a greater influence in this direction. For, what else is the novel than a reflection of the philosophy of the age? But the philosophy of the age is towards indifference;