

For giving us "Hugolatrous," even in remote connexion with Mr. Swinburne, "H. B." will receive gratitude from a large area of the North American continent. Swinburne's "Victor Hugo" is a prose pæan, a psalm, one long, tumultuous note of passionate reverence. Shading his eyes lest the temerity of his upward glance should be visited by blindness, the apostle of rhythm abases himself in the very dust of humility, and implores the great Gallic luminary in his celestial course still to shine upon the earth, which was once made radiant by his presence. It is a piece of magnificent literary insanity to the lay reader; but to poets probably most reasonable. I question much whether Swinburne intended it to be "trustworthy," as at once a guide to and exponent of cultured opinion of Hugo. He meant it simply, I fancy, as the embodiment of a disciple's worship for his master—a tribute upon which he lavishly squandered all the gold of his treasury, all the jewels of his casket, to the memory of a god who condescended to wear earth's bays for a season.

But to return to "H. B." and his opinions. It is quite delicious to read his autocratic dictation, that "as a rule," Mr. Watts "says the right thing about his Hugo;" that is, in so far as he agrees with "H. B.," but says the wrong thing, the untrustworthy thing, the "Hugolatrous,"—thanks again!—the Swinburnish thing, the moment he presumes to differ from the gentleman who is anxious to show how little criticism can be trusted within the scope of his quotation. "*De gustibus non disputandum.*"

SORE puzzled as to those best fitted to discharge the critical office, we once said, with despairing cynicism in our hearts, and our drawing-rooms, and our newspapers, "Behold, it is he who knows nothing about it! The first requisite of the critic is absolute, dense, Cimmerian ignorance. Thus only can we secure a just dispensation of injustice. Witness Johnson upon Pope, Poe upon Wordsworth, Carlyle upon everybody!" It did really seem that the fact of equality—in a sense the standpoint of a level plane—did somehow affect the judgment of these great people to dizziness, and that the little critic—the little lay critic—whose mark seemed so far beyond his muscle and his quiver, managed, in spite of disqualifications of stature, if not because of them, to hit the mark more satisfactorily. But now we have literary men, with a catholic spirit, liberal in praise and wise in censure, to write critically of other men's books, nor fear the charge of lauding in self-interest or condemning in jealousy. Poets write of poets—and where could we find a more striking illustration of this than the book which Edmund Clarence Stedman has written about his lyric compatriots,—historians of historians, novelists of novelists, fairly, broadly, impartially. As the critical department of literature, owing to the multitude of books that drop from the English and American press every year, thick and fast as leaves in autumn, is growing more and more important and useful and profitable, the number of literary men of this type engaged in it constantly increases. One inwardly prays that it may continue to increase: for even now, if the immortal playwright will permit me, the evil that men do lives contemporaneously, and flourishes in the daily papers; the good, alas! is often buried in their books.

SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN.

ON "THE CHOICE OF BOOKS."

IN the chaotic condition of the book-market, with at least a hundred Barabbas publishers on the other side of the line, pouring the filched wares of their broadsheet Libraries and other cheap issues of the press in incredible profusion into the country, it is more than ever difficult to make one's selection of books for the winter's reading, unaided by the judgment of English or other competent critics, and of the general tasters of literary pabulum. Nor has the difficulty disappeared in making one's choice since certain amiable people have assumed the self-imposed task of instructing the masses as to the world's hundred best books of any age or country, or even as to the fifty best novels from contemporary writers. Such literary judgments are notable only as the preference of individual minds, and are no more to be taken as our guides than are the predilections of one's personal, though cultivated, friend. In this matter the old adage will bear to be repeated, that "what is one man's meat is another man's poison." It is the books to which we feel ourselves drawn—often those upon which we happen by chance—that prove the most fructifying to our minds, and afford us the greatest enjoyment. Seldom, indeed, do we profit by those that are gratuitously prescribed for us.

Carlyle has told us, with his usual impressiveness, that "books, like men's souls, are divided into sheep and goats;" and accepting the dictum it behoves those who would keep themselves unspotted from the world to know and choose their company. Within the allotted span of life, it is given to no man to know everything. Even the omnivorous reader, not compelled to be economical of time, would be hard put to it to separate a tithe of the literature of the day into the diverse folds of the sheep and the goats. The difficulty, however, might be otherwise and modestly met, and a timely service rendered, were a literary journal like THE WEEK, in addition to its review columns, to devote space occasionally to a gossip article about books, which, without being appallingly didactic, would give a

fairly intelligent idea of their contents, and an unbiassed estimate of their worth. Nor ought it to matter much were both the expression of individual, and by no means infallible, opinion. In this busy age, and to a large class of people who have little leisure, and perhaps less taste for reading, it would be a service to single out now and then even a few names among contemporary writers who are making a fair bid for fame, and whom not to know is to brand oneself a Philistine. But Philistines in this matter most of us must be, for how impossible is it for the occasional, nay, even for the sedulous reader, in such an age as this, to know all the acknowledged authors of the day, or, if known by name, to know more than a chance book or two which they have written? Nor can it be deemed a wonder that one should confess to ignorance! Was there ever a time when literature was more prolific, or when the demands were greater upon one's reading leisure and interest?

In some respects it would be gratifying were all the printing-presses of this high pressure age peremptorily stopped. We should then be able to take an undistracted survey of our literary inheritance, and have leisure to overtake the reading with which one desires to be familiar, including that which is enshrined in "the world's hundred best books." But of these "hundred best books," suppose all agreed as to the authors to be "put upon the list," how many would profit by systematically reading them through? At the dinner table every vagary of appetite has to be considered; each has to consult his own taste and his own powers of assimilation and digestion. Why should it be otherwise at the literary banqueting-house? At the former there are few dishes of which all eat with relish, and with no after-qualms at the stomach. In sitting down with our "best authors," are there none who give us mental dyspepsia? It would be absurd to deny it; hence, it is an affectation to say that all must be read, and folly to administer reproof if there is much of which one wishes to remain ignorant.

Setting aside, then, the jumble of authors whose books, whatever be our likings, our educational mentors would insist upon our reading, with what freedom may we browse upon the pastures we find most to our taste! But in casting off the fetters of conventional habit, it must not be understood that we are impatient with the entire literature of the past; nor is it our aim to incite the general reader to prefer modern to old-time authors. We are simply pleading for liberty in choosing our reading, and for moral stamina in withstanding those pedants who consider that one's education has been neglected if one is not familiar, say, with the whole of the minor Elizabethan poets, or who drop you out of their set if you have not read every line of Ruskin and Browning. The temptation, of course, is admittedly great to plume oneself on some special bit of recently-acquired knowledge, of which one's friend is presumably ignorant. To yield to the temptation, however, is to label oneself a cad. If, on the other hand, one's friend is strong on the early English dramatists, he may be weak on the Lake Poets, and a heathen in his knowledge of the most rudimentary fact in Colonial history. He may be deeply versed in ancient history and mythology, and able to make clear to one the difference between "the Phoenix and the Phœnicians," but, like the Canadian schoolboy, he may mistake the political incident of the "double-shuffle" for a reference to clog-dancing, and write of Lord Durham's Report as if it dealt with the statistics of navigation in the Durham boats on the St. Lawrence. In the intellectual, no less than in the industrial, world, there must be options and a subdivision of labour: only a mental colossus aspires to know everything.

In these days, however, it is not the fault of the publishers if the present generation is not omniscient. Good books were never more cheap or abundant. A modest sum nowadays would buy almost the whole realm of English literature. One may purchase Bunyan's immortal allegory for a penny, all of Shakespeare's plays for sixpence; while a set of Ruskin, which not long ago was in England held at five hundred dollars, may be bought in a popular library on this side for as many cents. The wave of cheap literature, which for many years past has flung its rich wreckage on the shores of this continent, and swept up its waterways with fertilising power, has now crossed the Atlantic, and is beating with marked impress on the white cliffs of Albion. There, to-day, thanks to the enterprise of the publishers and the limitations of copyright, a few pence will buy the most treasured of English classics. The sale of these popular editions on this side is, we learn, unhappily limited. This, we dare say, is owing partly to the fact that the "standard authors," till now, in the main, high-priced in England, have long been accessible to all classes of readers in this country. But is not the limited sale accounted for by the aggressions of contemporary authors—chiefly sensational novelists—whose productions have all but swamped those of the older writers, and the reading of which has in some measure perverted the taste necessary for their enjoyment? Nevertheless, the sale on this side of the Atlantic is not small of the works of what are termed "our best authors;" and though the newspaper and the illustrated periodical are the chief reading of the masses, a large and ever-increasing constituency seeks to be familiar with the masterpieces of the language which have long been our instruction and delight.

But whatever reading is in vogue, let us not be servile to fashion, but cultivate the habit of divining the true and the good. Much of the literature of the time, without detriment to our intellectual well-being, we may safely leave unread. It may come to us tricked out with amazing literary dexterity, and with all the glamour of fine writing. It may, moreover, be heralded by all the glib *claqueurs* of the Press. But if we wish to read for something else than amusement, let us beware of the devices of the modern bookmaker. With the increasing cultivation of the age, it is easy for him to ply his trade, and it is his failing that he dazzles us more by his rhetoric than inspires us by his thought. There is no greater pitfall, at any rate, than the one he digs for us; and, falling into it, the beguiled reader will find it the more difficult to make a wise "choice of books."

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