

As the ATHENÆUM has seldom had an article upon this subject, perhaps we cannot do better than present an epitome of these four epistles, as the volume in which they are found is not likely in the hands of many of our readers. In giving the epitome, the language of the racy and original writer will be as closely adhered to as possible. The first of these letters embraces those points which have been set forth times without number; and the other three dwell upon what is little attended to, but what is nevertheless more important. In the latter, the author shows the evil influence of an immoderate use of fictitious works upon practical benevolence, and the hardening effects of excessive sensibility. But we will look at the subject in the order in which Mr. Rogers has treated it.

Novels are not by any means to be indiscriminately condemned. Every thing depends upon the quality and quantity. The *imagination* is a faculty given us by God for development; and it is healthfully stimulated by works of fiction of a high order. *Taste* should be cultivated, and works of fiction, inspired by real genius, have a beneficial tendency in that direction. Novels often inculcate important lessons of life and conduct in a more pleasing form than the simple didactic style admits of; and when based on knowledge of human nature, and developed with dramatic skill, may teach many an important truth of moral philosophy, more effectively than an abstruse treatise. When the *style* is what it should be, they increase our knowledge of language, and give us greater command over it. And as mental relaxation is a need of all who are diligent in their employments, such relaxation is easily and legitimately found in the occasional perusal of a judicious work of fiction.

Now the immense majority of novels, have no tendency to fulfil any of the ends indicated, but have a directly contrary effect. The number of *good* novels at command is more than one can possibly read, so that there is no excuse for indulg-

ing in trumpery. Inferior novels enfeeble the intellect—impoverish the imagination—vulgarize taste and style—give false or distorted views of life and human nature,—and, what is perhaps worst than all, waste that precious time which might be given to solid improvement. The mind sinks insensibly to the level of such books, and as the appetite for reading trash becomes more and more voracious and indiscriminate, it leaves neither power nor inclination to appreciate better books. If the reader does not feel that what he reads is worth reading *for its own sake*,—that he could read it over again with pleasure;—if he does not feel that the incidents are naturally conceived, the scenes vividly described, the dialogue dramatic and piquant, the characters sharply drawn, he may be sure the book is worthless. No fiction is *intellectually*, worth anybody's reading, that has not considerable merit as a work of art; and such works are ever felt to be worth reading again, often with increase of interest. It is indeed the truest test of all the highest efforts of this kind;—new beauties steal out upon us on each perusal. If for a while no fiction is read but such as will bear to be often read, the taste will become pure and elevated, and a bad novel will grow hateful.

And too many even of the very best novels may be read. The imagination may be too much stimulated and developed, till it at length stunts all the severer faculties which demand a proportional culture. Relaxation to be of any value should be moderate—the confectionary of ordinary diet. Keep a novel for an hour of well-earned leisure, or as relief after arduous duty, and the fare will be doubly delicious. When ordinary books of a sober and instructive character are read with disrelish, when practical duties are returned to with reluctance and the work-a-day world looks sombre and sad-colored to you, rest assured that you have been lingering too long in fairy-land, and indulging too much in day-dreams.