

Truth versus Fiction.

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"TRUTH is the most powerful thing in the world since fiction can only please by its resemblance to it." There have always been those who were opposed to the employment of fiction, either in the shape of novels for the grown-up, or fairy tales and story books for the young, even when these have been of a moral or religious nature. The following are some testimonies on this subject: -

Robert Hall wrote – "Nor can I reckon it among the improvements of the present age, that, by the multiplication of the works of fiction, the attention is diverted from scenes of real to those of imaginary distress; from the distress which demands relief to that which admits of embellishment; in consequence of which the understanding is enervated, the head is corrupted, and those feelings which were designed to stimulate to active benevolence are employed in nourishing a sickly sensibility." "This is fine reading," says a reviewer of a good book, "and such as we like to commend in preference to this all-prevailing fiction, which is mere wind. In the last great day men may be startled to discover how much the crime, the hollowness, the heartlessness of this generation is due to the surfeit of novels to which it is treating itself. We make our lives fictitious by feeding upon fiction." Mr. Phelps, late American Ambassador to Britain, writes- "The everlasting repetition, through countless thousands of volumes, of the story of the imaginary courtship and marriage of fictitious and impossible young men and women; this is the staple of what is now well called fiction, because it never could exist in fact. What food for an immortal mind to live on year in, year out, as its principal literary nourishment!" "The more our young men give attention to history and other really instructive matters, the better for their minds and characters. Fiction is poor food for the soul, and those who try to live upon it must become feeble in moral sinew. There is no sort of excuse for devouring so much of the literary pastry of romance, for the more solid meats are quite as full of flavour, and infinitely more satisfying. We attribute much of the erroneous doctrine, and still more of the frivolous spirit of the age, to the drenching of men's minds with watery fiction, to the washing out of the material whereof true manhood is made up."

I have only once seen an elaborate "Protest against the Employment of Fiction as a Channel of Christian Influence." It was written by the Rev. George William Butler, M.A., who maintained that "the system is a false system; it is unlawful in principle, and injurious in its operation." Novels for older people and miry tales for children were both unquestionably bad. Some of his arguments were as follows: - "Fiction is akin to falsehood..... In any way to trifle with truth is not right.....The admission that a book is a fiction will not place it on the level of honest history.... On the whole, while we honour the motives of the religious story writer, we cannot approve the methods used, and we believe that the good that is said to be done by his story, is done rather in spite of the fictitious element, than by means of it; and that the same amount of good might be better done by safer and more legitimate means."

"Fiction is not justified by the example of parables in the Bible. In the parable a spiritual truth is told in symbolical language, A parable is a comparison, run allegory is a statement in other words, but a fiction is that which is made up or false, . . . In every parable there is a spiritual transaction that underlies the narration, and withdraws it from the category of the mere illustrative story."

"Fiction is a presumptuous forgery of the handwriting of God in providence. Having studied the course of God's government in the world, the author is now creating a little world of his own, stored with things ordinary and things extraordinary, inhabited by men and women begotten at the bidding of his lively fancy. All is arranged as he sees fit. Now he kills, and now he spares alive; virtue and vice are requited according to his temper; successes and disappointments are disposed at his will. Things divine are not less subject to the decrees of his omnipotent pen. Now souls are converted to God; now prayers are offered up; now dire catastrophes overtake the unprepared, while blessings are showered down upon the righteous. Thus are the various dispensations of providence counterfeited, and the counterfeits are presented to Christian readers as equally instructive with the veritable works of God." The grace of God is out-done. The signal tokens of God's watchful care are rendered signal and special no longer by the storyteller, "for he can recount coincidences and opportune deliverances which will, by comparison, make the actual providence appear quite ordinary. From all these inventions a grave evil follows. When counterfeit bank notes are abroad; there will be a general distrust of paper money. Who is to tell which is

which? Just so is it in reference to religious anecdotes. Some are true, and properly endorsed with a trustworthy signature; others are rank forgeries. It is not always possible to discover to which class the book claims to belong; even by enquiring of the publisher you cannot always ascertain this point. Now, whereas it is well-known that the book market is stocked with providential and spiritual marvels, with which neither providence nor the spirit of God have had anything to do, a widespread suspicion is begotten amongst the public." If the smallest events of our daily lives are redeemed from triviality by the consideration that they are specially ordained of God, "who can say that the providences which attend any man's course are so insignificant and ordinary that a counterfeit biography will teach as much and illustrate the hand of God as well as a record of facts which are strictly true?

How shocked we would be if any one should compose a supplement to any of the books of the Bible, avowing the fictitious element, and protesting that the object was to illustrate the grace of God! "But, if the great things of God, as recorded in Scripture, may not be thus tampered with without profanity, is there not something of the same profanity in forging the signature of the King of Heaven in the books of His providence and of His grace?"

Is the fiction writer not placed in this dilemma? "Either he must atheistically leave out God, or presumptuously introduce His name amongst fancies and inventions," and is there not something shocking in the introduction of holy and eternal topics in the midst of the conceits and fancies of the brain. "Shall the puppets of my own creation be made to pray, and to become the subjects of saving grace? And shall the Almighty Himself be represented as playing a part in the story? Surely this is presumption?

"Fiction unfits the mind for apprehending truth" - inducing mental lassitude. "The study of fiction hardens the heart," - schooling it into deadness and indifference. "Suppose a firm believer in hydropathy, homeopathy, or any other medical system, were to sit down and compose stories of invalids restored to health, would his own persuasion of the truth of his system, or the perfect similarity of his supposed cases to real ones which might be cited, shelter him, even amongst his own party, from a shower of very ugly names? And is a believer in Christianity to

be applauded for supporting his creed by narrating circumstances which, though they never did happen, yet were in essential features like those that do,"

It is in vain to hope to make the Gospel popular, and to take Satan captive by compromises. " Oh, but," it is said, "the class of readers whom we desire to reach will not read your good missionary biographies, and careful histories, and intellectual treatises; they must have something that will interest them. They have chosen the novel as their favourite style of reading; why, then, may we not meet them in their own path, and, "becoming all things to all men" sanctify the thing to them? This is the reason why we write story books for children, and religious novels for the older people." It is with some such notions as this, that our two great Tract Societies have admitted such a vast amount of fiction into their list of books. It is thus that nearly all the religious magazines have assigned a place for a "serial" in every number. "It is all in vain. Satan never did cast out Satan and he never will. Compromise of principle never did avail in the establishment of principle, and it never will. We are not to do evil that good may come. The Apostle Paul solemnly disavowed the use of "enticing words of man's wisdom" as a means of grace; and God will not own them now. The good seed of His Word will prevail; and not this sowing with mingled seed, which carnal policy suggests."

"As to those who will not feed on wholesome food (and no other will contribute to strength and growth), their spiritual appetite must be restored by fasting, or by well-timed medicine, and not by these highly-spiced dishes: or, if they will have such things, let the world cater for itself, for never does the Church of Christ so squander its energies, as when it leaves the Word of God, and faithlessly attempts to substitute some lower agency in the place of the Gospel. Fiction apart from the positive harm it does, also does harm negatively, namely, by displacing more profitable literature," of which, in these days, there is no lack. "Fiction tends to create a distaste for truth." History, travels, biography, etc., are looked upon as dry and heavy, especially when something of these can be had sugared over, and in more lively forms. "The tendency of the reading of fiction is to vitiate the pure appetite for, and to destroy the keen enjoyment of the truth." The subject-matter of most works of fiction, even if true, would be unprofitable. The small talk which constitutes the bulk of the matter of the ordinary novel, is as the talk of the lips that "tendeth only to penury". The writer of the Protest from which the above

quotations are made concludes by showing that: "The imagination may be better employed than in writing or reading works of fiction."

It has always seemed to me a pity that our large Tract Societies and similar publishing houses, which have done noble work for the cause of truth, should lend themselves to promote the increase of works of fiction, or literature resembling in any way the sensational kind which does so much to deprave the taste of both old and young. Mr. Spurgeon complains of the Religious Tract Society publishing handbooks on cricket and football. He says: "We hardly see what the Religious Tract Society has to do with these sports. It would be fairer to the publishing firms if these subjects were left to them. The Society will have a wide enough field if it minds its own hallowed business."

Is he not right? Great as the blessing is which has attended the work of such societies, might it not have been vastly greater had they bent their whole energies and devoted their whole influence to the production and circulation of what belonged to their legitimate business, instead of being weakly led away by the desire to "keep up with the times." It is indeed sad to see Religious Tract Societies, and societies established for the very purpose of propagating Christian knowledge, pandering to the tastes of the people, and sometimes employing writers whose religion, if not conspicuous by its absence, too often expends itself in a few moral reflections.

It is also to be deplored that so few booksellers appear to be actuated by any right principle in regard to what they sell. No doubt many of the small dealers who sell "penny dreadfuls," and other pernicious publications, have no adequate idea of the evil which is done by these, nor of their own responsibility in the matter. With many of them "evil is wrought from want of thought"; but how many better-class booksellers there are who sell much that is questionable, or even undoubtedly bad, and who seek to justify themselves on the plea that there is a demand for such literature, and that it pays them to supply it. A miserable plea, truly, for anyone professing to be a Christian.-

"Our Reading" by J. Forbes Moncrieff, C.A.