

THE "SPECTATOR" V. THE "ENGLISH REVIEW."

A PECULIAR METHOD OF PURIFYING LITERATURE.

FOR six weeks the *Spectator* and the *English Review* have been bitterly quarrelling. The trouble arose out of an article entitled "Thoughts on Morals," by Frank Harris, which appeared in the *English Review* of June. The Editor of the *Spectator* was shocked by the article and denounced the *English Review* with bell, book, and candle. With masterly self-sacrifice he will refuse to notice the *English Review* in future, and incidentally he will lose its advertisements.

But in the meantime he has given the *Review* the time of its life, and has furnished the innocent readers of the *Spectator* with some carefully selected and thoroughly spicy copy. The *Spectator* reminds me of the famous expurgated edition of Juvenal, in which all the wicked passages were collected in an appendix.

In passing, I may remark that the *English Review* was also noticed in *M. A. P.* It never occurred to me to nose through its pages in order to discover the delicious viands which are set out so alluringly by the *Spectator*. I asked myself whether there was any article in the paper calculated to assist human happiness.

I spotted Mr. Whitehead's philippic against the medical faculty, which, I have reason to believe, has caused the *English Review* to double its circulation. This really important contribution escaped the attention of the *Spectator*, which was evidently on the look-out for a different type of copy.

I am not impressed by the new style of seizing upon some paragraph, quoting it, denouncing it, and then getting up a glorious correspondence upon it, which you carry on for weeks, all in the sacred cause of pure thought. If Mr. St. Loe Strachey had wished to convince people, his best course would have been simply to have ignored the *English Review*, without making a journalistic scoop of it.

The quotation to which Mr. Strachey objects is as follows:

"The Italian proverb, 'Peccato di carne non e peccato' (the sins of the flesh are not sins), has a good deal to say for itself. It is certain that a little excess in youth in the gratification of natural desire is less harmful than the abstinence generally recommended in England. . . . Temporary excesses are not harmful; sometimes, indeed, they are positively beneficial. Our vagrant nature is impatient of rigid limits. And the tolerance already accorded to one sex should be extended to the other. Indeed, were it not for the inconvenience and danger of maternity it would hardly be denied that love and passion and all the myriad consequences of love are more natural in woman than in man and should be regarded with even greater leniency."

In plain English, this means that young men are none the worse if they sow their wild oats. This is, I believe, a detestable doctrine, but it is certainly stated in so cool and philosophic a manner that I cannot conceive of any pulse being quickened by the paragraph. Is the *Spectator* quite certain that it never reviews, and even praises, books which will do a good deal more harm than Italian quotations?

But what is to be said of the *Spectator* basing a crusade like this upon a quotation which is garbled? In the case of the Dickens Stamp Fund I drew attention to the garbling of Dickens' will. I have now to tell the *Spectator* that there has seldom been a more deceptive quotation than the one it gives. The words omitted are as follows:

"In maturity, on the other hand, artists and those given to severe mental labour will find in complete abstinence a renewal of vigour. Balzac declared that nothing but periods of monkish self-denial gave him the power necessary to produce masterpieces. There is no general law, but the French proverb 'Une fois n'est pas coutume' is valuable."

The part which makes for free love is selected for publicity by the *Spectator*, on the ostensible ground that wherever it is read it will do harm. The part which makes for abstinence is suppressed by the *Spectator*, I presume on the ground that it will do good. I hold no brief for Mr. Frank Harris. In his day he has been Editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *Saturday Review*.

He is not, I think, a final authority on how to make the best use of life, and his cleverish style does not impress me. But in handling such writers the *Spectator* has shown precisely how not to proceed.

Again, I protest strongly against the way in which the *Spectator* drags in politics. Here is a quotation:

"Surely one might have expected that the representatives and exponents of the Nonconformist conscience would have taken the matter up, and that some Liberal newspaper which could not have been accused of party spite should have belled the cat. Liberal papers like the 'Manchester Guardian,' the 'Daily News,' the 'Daily Chronicle,' and the 'British Weekly' cannot, we feel sure, approve of the kind of stuff we have quoted from Mr. Frank Harris' article, or believe that the reasons given to back up the claim that the 'English Review' is a 'great adult review' can be accepted at their face value, or are meant for any other purpose than to attract readers by ways that no honourable or high-minded conductors of a public print would care to employ. Those who profess to be the spiritual descendants and representatives of the Puritans and of the Puritan element in literature and public life should surely have been able to find words of condemnation for what we have condemned, and not have left it to a Unionist paper like the 'Spectator'—a supporter, as they no doubt sincerely hold, of all that is rotten and of ill omen in the State."

Let us look at this argument. Mr. St. Loe Strachey, a Unionist, boldly suggests that there ought to be a higher standard in Liberal papers than in Conservative papers on these questions of sex. He suggests that the Nonconformists are more decent in these affairs, or ought to be more decent, than common or garden churchmen. This theory is disloyal to his own political party and to his own church, and the truth is that it is only advanced in order to supply a little political dressing to the delightful salad culled from the articles by Mr. Frank Harris.

Of course, Mr. St. Loe Strachey has his reward. Columns of cheap, good copy have poured in from writers like Mr. George Russell, Mr. Ford Madox Hueffer, Mr. Henry Newbolt, Mr. Lawrence Binyon, and other eminent Pundits. For once the *Spectator* is actually interesting, but to my way of thinking, as I wade through the turgid flood of words, I am amazed at the general irrelevance to which these highly respectable authors descend. Actually one question in the controversy is whether Miss Elizabeth Robins does or does not put an extra "b" in her name. whatever bee there may be in her bonnet.

The real issue is quite simple. How ought a review which contains all manner of articles to be treated by the weekly Press? My own plan has been to search out those articles which seem really to advance human progress, and to concentrate on them. The *Spectator's* plan is to smell out any phrases or paragraphs which may conceivably be quoted with effect and made a subject for a fiery crusade. It then allows all who protest to fill its columns free of expense, adding to each letter puerile little comments which really mean nothing. After all, how can the *Spectator* get round the answer of Mr. Harrison, who edits the *English Review*, when he simply publishes a list of eminent authors who have filled his pages with alleged "garbage"? The list is overwhelming. It contains names like Lord Courtney of Penwith, Thomas Hardy, and Richard Whiteing, before which the *Spectator's* darts fall dead. Other names may represent a different school—Mr. Aleister Crowley, for instance, who has been dealt with in *M. A. P.*, but this only shows that the Editor of the *English Review*, though a man of brilliant attainments, needs experience, which will doubtless come to him in due course.

The *Spectator's* attempt to purify literature has my sympathy. Possibly I may have done something in that direction myself. But the tactics of the *Spectator* and its tone of insufferable superiority—to say nothing further of a palpable failure to quote fairly—do not help matters in the least. Such strategy merely alienates for an important crusade all the vigorous thinkers of our time.