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Book Review of The Great Metropolis

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THE GREAT METROPOLIS: By the author of "Random Recollections of the House of Commons."

This amusing book is presented to the American public in the cheap form of less than five weekly numbers of Mr. Theodore Foster's "Cabinet Miscellany"—at 19 cents a number; thus reducing to little more than 50 cents, a work of which the English price, we believe, is about two dollars.

"The Great Metropolis," every body knows, can be no other than London: and most minutely diversified are the particulars in which Mr. Grant has ministered to the craving curiosity of all who speak and read the English language, with regard to that great heart of English life, manners, fashions, and literature. His descriptions, however, are not topographical: it is with the moral aspects and attributes—not the physical—of London, that he has to do. He does not give the dimensions of streets or buildings; or describe the gorgeousness, or the relative positions, of palaces, or churches, or Tower, or Monument, or squares. But, after a rapid and graphic view of those visible circumstances which would soonest catch an observant and philosophic eye upon a general survey of the city from some aerial station above it—were such a stand attainable—he carries his reader to the Theatres; introduces him (without danger of his being black-balled) into the Clubs; plunges with him into the Gaming Houses, and shows him the funds who tenant those "Hells," chap-isons him then, through the three classes of Metropolis Society—the Higher, Middling, and Lower; and lastly, details (too minutely perhaps, but very entertainingly) the condition and statistics of the newspaper and periodical Press.

It is in this last one of his walks, that we (from professional sympathy, perhaps) accompany him with most pleasure: and we shall give, in a condensed form, a few of the many particulars which have so interested us.

The whole number of periodical publications in London, from quarterly Reviews down to daily newspapers, is fifty nine; every one of which, Mr. Grant mentions by name,—describing its moral, intellectual, and political (or religious) character, its age, price, editor, chief contributors, and extent of circulation. The daily papers are eleven; weekly papers thirty,—viz. five literary, and twenty five political or religious; quarterly reviews, five; monthly reviews or Magazines, thirteen.

There is a remarkable preponderance, of the Press, in favor of liberal principles, in politics. On the liberal side are seven daily, and thirteen weekly papers; namely, 'The Morning Chronicle,'—'The Morning Advertiser,'—'The Constitutional,'—'The Globe,'—'The Courier,'—'The Sun,'—'The True Sun,'—'The Examiner,'—'The Spectator,'—'The Observer,'—'Bell's Life in London,'—'The Weekly Dispatch,'—'Bell's New Weekly Messenger,'—'The Atlas,'—'The Satirist,'—'The Weekly True Sun,'—'The News,'—'The Sunday Times,'—'The Patriot,' and 'The Christian Advocate,' making twenty in all: while the Conservatives, or Tories, have but four daily, and seven weekly papers; viz: 'The Times,'—'The Herald,'—'The Post,'—and 'The Standard,'—'Bell's Weekly Messenger,'—'The John Bull,'—'The Age,'—'The Watchman,'—'The Weekly
The Observer obtains its items of intelligence, on the whole, as well as any other journal. Besides keeping in regular pay, a strong corps of newspapers, it pays other persons three pence a line, for all that furnish, worthily of publication. The usual rate, with other papers, is but half that sum.

To the use of the most newspapers, who often themselves observe and deplore the uncontrolled bitterness that sometimes reigned in their encounters, pervades all society, and sets neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend. — we commend the following traits in The Observer.

"He feels strongly on all great questions: he is a strenuous advocate of the rights of the people, and yet he never sets all society, and sets neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend. — we commend the following traits in 'The Observer'..."

Mr. Fonblanque's articles, at once becoming the dignity of the press, and calculated to preserve peace, and diffuse true light, among the people. The former "is conducted with much gentlemanly feeling. Anything in the shape of coarseness or violence never finds its way into his columns. Everything in it is previously examined, often rewritten with the greatest care, both with the view of guarding against any impropriety of expression, and ensuring a condensed accuracy in its statements of fact."

The Examiner's original articles "are always full of wit and argument. You never read one of them without being struck with the brilliancy of some of the writer's ideas or illustrations. There is, too, a wise and quiet subtil sense pervading the whole of his Fonblanque's articles, which possess the rare good fortune of being equally perceived, and admired, in the most intellectual and the least informed circles of readers of newspapers. Hence there is, perhaps, no weekly journal whose readers are in such equal proportions among the higher and lower classes. The Examiner never indulges in declamation. This is somewhat surprising, when we consider, as we constantly observe, that the most newspapers have, in their columns, and deplore the uncontrollable bitterness that sometimes reigned in their encounters, pervades all society, and sets neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend. — we commend the following traits in 'The Observer.'"..."
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We would gladly extract several other choice and laughable anecdotes of the reporter's gallery; but space would fail us. We pass to the closing subject—the Reviews, and other literary periodicals, of London.

There are five quarterly reviews: The Quarterly,—The London and Westminster,—The Foreign Quarterly,—The British and Foreign,—and The Dublin. Of these, the first is notoriously Conservative in its politics: the last was established anonymously, for the magazines and reviews, now, tends (we have thought) to puff up the reader with an extraordinary merit, or from very eminent authors, still to make the modern practice of periodicals, to the modern practice of good breeding, he is satisfied with the reviewer's (often opaque) features are illuminated with triumph and is unconsciously led to adopt his opinions of it, with all the unquestioning reverence that a pious heathen used to feel, for the response of an oracle. When the critic is able and answer's, he is, too generally, is 'not to aid his readers in entering more easily, or better prepared, into the thoughts, feelings, or truths, which his author endeavors to teach or illustrate; but, to make the author look fool: and he prostitutes his talents to enable the common herd of his readers to suppose themselves looking down from the vantage ground of superior intellect, upon the poor, blundering poet or philosopher, who is the subject of review.' We quote, substantially, from that master but most amusing book, "Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolks,"—written by no other than Mr. Lockhart himself. He afterwards proceeds thus:

"The most vulgar blockhead, who takes up and reads an article in the Edinburgh Review, imagines for the time that As himself is quito superior to any thing the age can produce, Now and then, to be sure, some passing circumstance may daunt a momentary disquietude into the sanctity of his self-complacency; but this will only make him long the more fervently for the next number of the Review, to convince him that he was all in the right—to redouble his fuming lamp of his vanity, and make

adjacent nicely the scales, of his literary judgment sent. At all events it is as right, as it is difficult, for a work which he has already judged, to be unbiased by any personal, local, or party considerations, in the sentence he pronounces upon an author."

We, and others, have doubted whether frequent reading had not some ill effects upon the mind. It tends (we have thought) to pull up the reader with an imagination that he is master of all that the criticized work contains, when in truth, he knows little more than is told by its title page. Thus he becomes at once shallow and vain. He is satisfied with the reviewer's (often garbled) abstract of the book; and is unconsciously led to adopt his opinions of it, with all the unquestioning reverence that a pious heathen used to feel, for the response of an oracle. When the critic is able and answer's, he is, too generally, is 'not to aid his readers in entering more easily, or better prepared, into the thoughts, feelings, or truths, which his author endeavors to teach or illustrate; but, to make the author look fool: and he prostitutes his talents to enable the common herd of his readers to suppose themselves looking down from the vantage ground of superior intellect, upon the poor, blundering poet or philosopher, who is the subject of review.' We quote, substantially, from that master but most amusing book, "Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolks,"—written by no other than Mr. Lockhart himself. He afterwards proceeds thus:

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his conceit as bright a thing as ever. Meanest, whatever shade of unmeaning or feeling has been allowed him by nature, remains wholly uncanonical; and the facility of his mind are lost and sunk in its kind, brute wish to see everything levelled before his self-love."

In all this, we fear, there is much truth; not as respects the Edinburgh Review in particular—for that is not less impious, and certainly far older, than the Quarterly or any other existing Review—but as respects all criticism, which is not actuated exclusively by the desire to present, candidly and fully, the true character and a faithful summary of the works criticized. Some of the objections which we have written or borrowed, are perhaps successfully answered by Mr. Grant, in a passage which, though rather long, will so simply repay the trouble of perusal, that we quote it entire:

"It has been objected to the prevalence of periodical literature among us, that it has generated a taste for light or superficial reading, to the neglect of works containing solid information and of established reputation. The assumption that standard works are neglected at the present day, is altogether groundless. They are, on the contrary, purchased and read to a much greater extent than ever. As a house-holder—the best possible authority in such a case—the fact stands, and he will tell you at once, that the demand for the works of Shakspere, Milton, Pope, Addison, Hume, Gibbon, Johnson, Robertson, &c. has kept pace with the increased demand for periodical literature. But why put the question to any one, when we have the evidence of our own ears and eyes on the subject? Are not saw collars, in every variety of form, and at every price, announced every day, of the works of the authors I have mentioned? And do we not find these works in every house where we have occasion to visit? Better proof still—do we not find them in the hands of every one with whom we happen to converse?"

"So far from periodical literature, when, like ours, of a respectable character, creating an injurious influence on works of merit, it must, in the nature of things, produce a quite contrary effect. It is one of the leading objects of almost every leading journal, and it is the only one of many, to bring before the public those works which display the greatest talent, and to conceal or to obliterate those which are worthless. It will hardly be disputed that those journalists who discharge their duty in this respect with judgment and impartiality, are more effective auxiliaries in the cause of general literature. That these are some periodicals, which, being the property, are prohibited to serve the purposes, of particular individuals, is not to be denied. The cases of this kind, however, are comparatively few. In the majority of cases, our periodicals are conducted on most honorable principles."

"It is an acknowledged fact, that, but for the assistance of our periodicals, many of the most talented authors which this country has produced, would never have been known to public fame, but would, like the violet of the wilderness, have been born to blush unseen, and want their dawning on the day."

"Even the most stupidus literate work to which the creative powers of human genius ever gave birth—"The Paradisal Lost"—Milton—was suffered for many years to linger in obscurity, until Addison, in his periodical Spectator, pointed out its innumerable and matchless beauties. There is nothing impassable in the exposition, that but for the recommendations of the periodical, "The Paradisal Lost" would never have had the moderate fortune of reaching even a second edition. Indeed, its very existence might have been unknown at the present day."

"In more modern times, the instances are innumerable, in which our greatest authors were their deserved popularity entirely to the influence of our periodical literature. I could name many instances of writers themselves being, perfectly conscious, and willing to acknowledge, that but for the assistance which periodical literature has extended to them, their names and their works would have been equally unknown. There are others, again, among the popular authors of the present time who, in consequence of other adventitious circumstances, would, perhaps, have attained to a certain degree of eminence without the aid of periodical literature, but who are, nevertheless, indebted to it for the far greater portion of their fame. The novels of Sir Walter Scott, for example, might have been read and admired to a certain extent, had there been no periodical in existence during the term of his literary career; but I appeal to those who are acquainted with the literary fortunes of that singular man, whether, in such a case, his works would have attained a truth part of the circulation of which they can boast, or himself a truth part of the laurels which were wreathed around his brow."

The same observations apply with equal truth to many others of our most popular authors.

"There is another reason in which our periodicals have been of signal benefit to literature in general. I allude to the facilities they afford to men of genius for developing their talents. I refer to a previous chapter to the just observation of Q. S. M.—that the greatest geniuses must commonly be cut out at a very early period, and that the periodical press is the only one of many, to bring before the public his articles anonymously, and thus ascertain what the public opinion is regarding his writings, without any one knowing whose those writings are."

"Such are some of the advantages of periodical literature."

"It is however, these remarks may be (and we concur in most of them), there are three reasons why we would impress upon all readers of reviews; and with these cautions duly observed, we believe that the utmost of Mr. G.'s encomium upon that sort of reading, is true:"

"1. Never rely implicitly on the reviewer's judgment upon the merits of the book reviewed, if it relates to any very important topic, or if the author, or his subject, be one likely to excite any bias whatsoever in the reviewer's mind: but appeal to the book itself, or to some review of a different party-compilation; or to both."

"2. Be in like manner guarded against taking the reviewer's summary of what the book contains, as a satisfaction in full of your curiosity respecting it; if it be evidently a profound and solid work, not wholly foreign to your pre-determined course of study."

"3. Do not let reviews (and far less, the lighter parts of periodical literature), which, after all, are for the most part comparatively trashy and ephemeral—prevent you from developing your chief attention to the established, standard authors of the language: Shakespeare, Bacon, Locke, Milton, Swift, Pope, Addison, Goldsmith, Hume, Robertson, Gibbon, Johnson, Cowper, Burke, Stewart, &c. These are the mines of thought, the classic models of style, to be most deeply and curiously scanned."

Mr. Grant states a most serious accusation against Sir Walter Scott—"that he was known as the author of the Waverley Novels, he furnished a favorable Review of one of them ("'Tales of my Landlord") to 'The Quarterly Review.' Sir Walter, however, is

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vindicated by the American Editor, who affirms that his article, carefully avoiding the utterance of any opinion upon the work, merely illustrated it; and that some obviously misplaced censures, which Mr. Grant alleges to have been designed as a stratagem, to attract the public sympathy and favor, were in reality meant but to keep up the author's whimsical incognito. We gladly embrace this latter construction, as most in keeping with the high integrity, which belongs to the consciousness of exalted talents; and which compassionously characterized the favorite writer of the present age. Mr. G. offers the following refutation of a common suspicion cast against authors:

"I know there is an impression abroad that it is quite a common thing for authors to review their own works. I may be pardoned for digressing for a moment while I state that the impression is altogether unfounded. My acquaintance with periodical literature generally, and especially with that of London, enables me to speak on this point in the most positive terms. Authors as a body, and the great majority of the editors of our periodicals, are men too high a sense of honor to be guilty of such conduct. Two instances only of an author reviewing his own works have come to my knowledge, out of nearly a thousand reviews which I am known to have furnished to the London press." 

There is much that we wished to quote from Mr. G.'s book, respecting the thirteen monthly, and the five weekly, literary periodicals—the Gentleman's Magazine, which has now attained the venerable age of 104 years (having been established in 1733), and for which Johnson need to write; the 'Monthly Review,' established in 1749, and numbering among its contributors, Smollett, Goldsmith, Johnson, Hume, Sterne, and Hawkins; the "Monthly Magazine," begun in 1786; and others, less ancient but at present more ably conducted. But we have filled out our allotted space; and with one more extract, displaying in a lively manner the fallibility of human judgments, we shall end, for the present, our scanty sojourn in "The Great Metropolis."

"On going through 'The Monthly Review' (says Mr. Grant) I have been often amazed with the erroneous estimates which the writers formed, of the merits of the works they noticed. Many authors, whose names are as unknown to us as to the inhabitants of Timbuctoo, were represented in that Review 60 or 70 years ago, as geniuses of the first magnitude: and a popularity wide as the civilized world, and lasting as time itself, was confidently predicted to them. Others, again, who were unceremoniously and at once consigned to everlasting oblivion, are now, and will continue to be for generations to come, popular in no ordinary degree."

In one form or another, the same truth, so mortifying to those who account Fame a divinity worthy to have health, peace, and life sacrificed at her shrine, has been reiterated times immemorable; but by none so impressively, as Byron, with whose exquisite lines we seize the pretext of a timely occasion, to beautify our page:

"Yet what awaits the aspiring poet's hope? To conquer ages, and with Time to cope! Now ere spread their wings, now nations rise, And other victories fill the triumphing skies. A few brief generations fleet along, Whose sons forget the poet and his song; Even now, what once loved Minstrels scarce may claim The transient mention of a dubious name! When Fame's loud trump hath blown its noblest blast, Though long the sound, the echo sleeps as last; And glory, like the Phoenix bids her base, Exhales her odor, blazes, and expires."

* English Bards and Scotch Reviewers.

† In allusion to Virgil.

"Vapitans, ut ultra, quae meque passion Toliere humo, pecuniae viam unisse per aera."

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