

Journalism & Literature

(Views and Comments)

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An enthusiastic chemical research student was explaining to me the other day how a School of Chemistry justifiably falls into disrepute when it shows itself willing to allow its activities to be affected by demands and problems immediately arising out of the world of commerce. To a mild question as to whether chemical inquiry so inspired might not be as fruitful in results as any arrived at along the path of "general" inquiry my enthusiast answered, "No." The two fields, though they overlapped at points, were quite distinct—their animating interest poles apart, and to identify them was to do damage to the first interests of both. The chemical discoveries by which commercial enterprise had been most effected had been by-products of general inquiry, rich drops from a broad stream whose own richness was the precondition of the droppings being what they were. Moreover, commercial undertakings can, and do, employ their own research-workers to pick up and glean for their own special interests; which is as should be: direct means adapted to set ends: purposes reputable in their own sphere appropriately subserved. But it was not appropriate that the activities of a School of Chemistry should be diverted into the service of any or all of such immediate ends. It has its own ends to serve: to assuage and whet afresh an everlasting curiosity in the "What" and "How" and "WHY" of things, and its highest utility lies in serving that. Its soul is curiosity and its reward Knowledge and an intenser curiosity and a deeper interest. Its end is never to arrive at an end: never to rest on achievements sufficiently long to exploit them commercially—which length of time as it seems is just coincident with that required to wean interest from science to profits. So that while each scientist is more than scientist and has purposes which are immediate ends—even money-making—in so far as curiosity about the behaviour of substances is a Master-passion, it must remain jealously separate from, and alien in spirit to, the common spirit bent on "making good" commercially: jealous just because it is rare while the commercial spirit is everywhere. Only in this and that sheltered valley to which other kinds of interest have retired in order to survive does another kind of spirit dominate. And there—just because it is rare—it is forbidden to the baser kind to be frail; if it is to survive, it must there remain dominant. Hence, it is an ominous sign for science when scientists are found ready to embroil the cool critical spirit of research in the feverish scramble after profits: even honest profits. . . . Thus my scientific friend, who seemed to have the argument fluent enough. And it had a not unconvincing sound, particularly to one who did not know what there is to be known of the history of science. But it must be confessed that it was not the force of the remarks

as applied to chemistry which made the arguments impressive. It was not even the irony of the commentary it suggests, that only because some men have interests about which they care more than about money do the interests which inspire other men to care more about money than about anything else achieve existence. It was rather when this story about chemistry and profits suggested an analogy between philosophy and journalism that it suddenly became sufficiently alive to seem worth transcribing here.

Life is only bankrupt when keeping on living does not seem worth the effort it entails. The fear of death or the horror of an imminent prospect of death do not come on the same level for comparison with a distaste for life: indeed the sole factor which invests these former with their element of tragedy is the assumption that they exist in conjunction with an ardent love of life. That millions of lives are being brought daily face to face with death does not therefore really affect the instinct of those who continue to live in comparative safety to be at pains to make their life pay its way in satisfactions. That which made life valuable before the war, if it be possible to preserve it during the war, is more than ever worth the preserving. To allow one's attention to become ensnared in affairs which are all made up of action and yet to occupy the role of the "inactive," begets a weariness of its own quite apart from any sense of depression which might arise out of the affairs themselves; so that to attempt to maintain the pleasures which still remain at their full quality becomes a service for the "inactive" eminently "worthy." If one were commander-in-chief or a modest private one would assuredly win the war, but being neither, nor yet anything between, attending to one's own business seems a reasonable preoccupation, while the steady obliteration of the dividing line between Journalism and Literature (Journalism and Philosophy: it is the same thing) is a task lying to hand; especially so, since it is by no means unlikely that a full recognition by the authorities of the disasters which this obliteration invites will not be a prerequisite of any successful dealing with the war: though, up to date, the process which before the war had gone far, since has merely become the more complete.

Journalism is the interested persuasion, by means of literary forms, of the general public to back or ban such purposes as seem good to those at whose instigation the persuasive effort is set in motion. Those who sketch the plan which "persuasion" is to follow may engage and pay "journalists" who are better able than they to manipulate the forms: or they may have the means and talents to carry out their verbal plans themselves. The feature which makes journalism into journalism is—not that it is bought and sold—but that it is subsidiary to ends beyond itself. All journalism is "interested": the servant of an interest and purpose; of the needs of a passing day and the moods of a changing person. It exploits literary form to further some particular enterprise. It is not literature though it exploits literature: not philosophy though it exploits it. That the material in which it shapes itself and in the use of which the manipulators are adept happens to be language brings journalism as near to literature as ability to mix paint brings the house-painter to the artist; both are reputable craftsmen but different: both require some ability: both have recognized uses—at least the house-painter has: and both work in paint. What the difference between the two exploiters of paint is can perhaps best be shown by the difference in

their attitudes towards the permanence of their work. The housepainter would feel more than depressed if he thought his effects likely to last for ever, or even for a lifetime; while the artist would give the study of a lifetime in order to lend a slightly added durability to his paint. The house-painter looks to the contents of his paint-pot to provide him with a job. He has nothing he values particularly to put into his painting; he spreads paint out under the direction of some one who wants a surface concealed by means of it. The artist out of his paint seeks to contrive a web which shall enmesh for all time some fact of feeling which he, at least, thinks worth holding in memory. The difference is that one is using a form as a contrivance to perpetuate something which he thinks valuable: the other is expressing what there is for him to express by flourishing the form itself. So with literature: literature is the transparent vase in which are preserved permanent features of the Human Mind. The desire to secure permanence for their work no matter how mistaken they may have been in the means they adopted to attain to it, is an essential characteristic of the writers of literature. Milton, for instance, deliberately selected the theological theme as a setting for his quota of observations about Man to men, on account of what he considered its strong promise of durability of interest. That probably it is this very choice which has made "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained" unknown books save in their passages of strong human revelation merely proves how difficult it is to disguise fustian, and that "beliefs" and direct human observations do not come on the same level of durability. This distinction between journalism and literature once frankly recognized: literature being—as to form—that which is most favourable to permanence and as to substance an accretion of the growing stock of unravelled human motives; journalism being a subsidiary form, one amongst many turned to assist, as may be, a passing purpose and taking its character from the end it serves; this distinction once openly recognized, the undue contempt which journalism receives becomes as meaningless as the contempt for house-painting, while it makes possible a more jealous care in fostering single-heartedness in literature. Journalism has received and earned contempt only because it has pretended to be inspired by the purpose which inspires literature, and so has courted judgment by standards intended for work which aspires to be judged as literature. Judged by such standards it is not possible for journalism or the journalist to escape condemnation. Inevitably, the journalist who merely does honestly what he is employed to do is written down a mean hack; whereas the *commis voyageur* who presses on his picked public his employer's Pills, Pianos, Shoddy Goods, Tinned Goods, what not, is a respectable person. The newspaper-proprietor is accounted a cunning defacer of "The Truth": a suborner of facile knaves to the detriment of the "Good of All"—that universal stalking-horse controversy—as compared on the other hand with the manufacturer, meat-merchant and the like, who are accounted the backbone of the community and embodiment of its free tradition. Yet each is bent on increasing his "influence," one in one market one in another: the medium at least of the journalist being more patent and obvious if his means are more subtle. What manner of man among you being in business and finding that his ambition—any one of the million ends upon which men do set their ambition—is furthered by a favourable Public Opinion would not set to work to influence that Opinion to the fullest extent he could? What maker of goods but sends out his agents to influence the market for them or company-promoter who fails to issue an attractive prospectus? This making of distinctions where none exist comes from confusing journalism with literature, and what journalists say with something which is called "Truth."

The development of controversy as an instrument of attack and defence is the most complex and the most engaging achievement of the human mind, and the complex study which its buried springs and its devious ways and methods present constitutes the province of the philosopher. It is the scrutiny of the motives which keep the countless controversies moving: the language of purposes—journalism—which makes philosophy the most fascinating as well as the most important of human interests, given a taste and zeal for it. Yet this interest has little to show for itself. Perhaps because there is little demand for its products. It is not popular: there is too much journalism and too many interests to be displeased to make the digging-out of any save the more graceful half of human motives welcome. The other half—when they appear—are received not as Philosophy but as Diabolism: things which should never have found utterance. And its unpopularity apart, human motives make distracting material to work in, and most would-be philosophers—would-be genuine ones that is—fall victims to their own material. Setting out to study "controversialists" they are captured by this and that particular controversy. The main stream of their interests is swallowed up in their localized warfare and little is left for the study of Man, the controversial animal. The explorer finds it more profitable and even more entertaining to take up company-promoting than to continue searching for treasure. It is more profitable, and the world is so made that men must put themselves in touch with profits somewhere: and since explorers by nature are few and returns upon exploration are almost nil, it is not surprising that these "human" researchers all turn propagandists: become journalists: trim speech to a set purpose: and beat the big drum. For of the two purposes of speech—speech the instrument of Revelation and the instrument of Seduction—journalism in its main intention knows only one. Journalism is always persuasive and seductive. Though superficially it may seem at times to set itself to "reveal" when it gives "News": it will invariably be found that the "News" has been given that "turn" which best accommodates it with the journal's main interests. Such "News" as is too difficult to be so turned promptly ceases to be "News"—and ceases to need chronicling. Journalism is indeed the skilled art of manipulating emphasis. The journalist is out to secure the adhesion of the people, and since the people accept that which is emphatically asserted and love the Strong Assertion and no less the maker of it, regulation of emphasis becomes his main business, and he learns how to let it fall just where it suits best the interest of those who employ him. If he can make himself conspicuous as a wielder of sufficiently strong emphasis he so wins the people's good will not only for the interest he furthers but also for himself. Popularity as well as profit and the excitement which comes of conflict is on the side of journalism: it is not strange that the journalist is nowhere to seek in any branch of "literature."

Very obviously clear is it therefore that it is not that journalists consider literature "higher" and "better" than journalism that they slur the dividing line between the two. They do not any more than the millionaire who has made a fortune out of some scientific invention thinks that the scientist pottering about at a bench with test-tubes is anything more than a simple and probably rather silly fellow. In fact the majority would agree that most of literature is barely reputable and much of it heinous. Once thoroughly a journalist always a journalist: even when such a one believes himself to be writing literature. For evidence of which we only need observe the "propagandist" drama: the "propagandist" novel: the propagandist "philosophy; and the "reporterist" poetry. "Propagandist" in terms of craftsmanship is just "journalistic." The Parson is clinching the

"moral" of his sermon in the Philosophy, and the "Social Reformer" is dabbling the ornamentation on his speeches in the Drama and what not: tracts they are, all of them. Why then this growing obliteration? It is simply a trick of the trade: a "confidence" trick. It is a far from easy task to beg support from people for one's own benefit: it puts one at a disadvantage. It deprives the people, moreover, of the comforting flattery that one's striving is solely in their interests; it quickens their suspicions and awakens their intelligence. Hence the attempt to identify journalism with literature which enables journalists to assume the garb of disseminators of an "Impartial Truth." For little as there is of it, people have sensed what is the role of literature and have identified it in its clearest and most concentrated form with philosophy and are ready to accept its verdicts for "Truth." That there is a philosophy which is not philosophy: a body of observations set up to pass for "Truth" which are not observations of human motives at firsthand but rather obscured exploitations of motives in the service of some interest—of the Church, the State, of Academic Tradition and the like, has gone far to render "Truth" an obfuscated, indefinable, and therefore useless term; without being able, however, wholly to efface a vague sense of that for which it stands. The instinct persists that there must exist a genuine philosophy: outcome of a sheer curiosity in the motives of Man: which is keen and alert to distinguish those ways and words which are involuntary expressions of himself and those which are but shields to cover and defend himself, and which is likewise unrelated to any desire to trip him up and seize an advantage. It is the fruit of such curiosity which roughly is accepted as "Truth" and the form which preserves it is literature—good or feeble literature according to the strength of the curiosity which inspires it, the industry and time devoted to it, and the ceaselessness of the pruning of its form to clothe it in transparency. As it seems: what the specific form which a philosopher gives his contribution is, depends upon the amount of passion there is in his curiosity. If he cares sufficiently, he will give the most transparent and economized and accordingly the most permanent form to it: that of Poetry. If he is sure enough of the character of the "raw material" he has analysed out, he will risk throwing it back into a synthesis and re-creating man: as in Drama. If he is too occupied, or too careless, or has so much material on his hands that he prefers to put it all out at the expense of leaving it "in the rough" it will remain as Philosophic Prose. But whatever form literature finally takes it is in its substance, Philosophy: curiosity about human nature: a laying bare of the springs of the human mind. Which explains why any great anxiety about Forms—particularly in young writers—always seems to bear with it its suspicions. Form—even in its perfection—is not something extraneous to its substance. It grows up with, springs out of and is the index of the substance's own quality. Given the one in sufficient degree and the other follows inevitably. The laziest fellow will exert himself when he knows of a certainty that he is working to unearth a hidden treasure, and a man with something vital to say will take the necessary pains about the saying of it.

It is therefore because the *bona fides* of literature are more acceptable and not because literature's mission is held to be "better" or its quality "higher," that journalism has sought to identify itself with it. And it is the same cause which explains the unspoken convention which all controversialists are at one in observing, that the one factor in controversy which gives it character and meaning—the personal bias of the controversialists—shall be ignored. For to have it acknowledged would deprive both sides of the role of the indignantly righteous and destroy the

assumption that journalism nominally is "disinterested." Whence the shriek of each against its rival of "Interested," "Venal," carrying the inference —true enough, as far as it goes, since each side stands for "Infection" of "Leper" and "Plague-spot" would be robbed of its relevance and emphasis. To acknowledge that all sides are "interested": that journalism is nothing but the language of "interests," would be to deflate the journalistic balloon and defeat the purpose for which it was created: the persuading of the public that only in a spirit of immaculate disinterestedness and in the sole interests of the "Public Good" is so much wordy service set in motion. And not only as a stalking horse does literature lend its uses to journalism. As far as he is acquainted with it the journalist draws upon the funded knowledge "of human nature which literature provides and uses it as far as it suits the immediate interest of his propaganda. All his knowledge of all the world he draws in to further his end. Some one in *The Egoist* the other day made the remark that the great struggle: the unintermittent warfare ever going on was that which the Individual wages against the Many: the One against the Whole. The skilful journalist could both teach and demonstrate how the Many provides the foraging-ground for the One. As the garden to the Bee, the Many is to the One: his chiefest source of sustenance, to the extent that he is able to suck out nutriment rather than poison. Which ability in the One depends upon his knowledge. Lacking knowledge and foraging far he is likely to find the Many dangerous: which is precisely what happens to journalists—and their proprietors—who having cut off the springs of a literature at length find themselves in urgent need of one.

Of the foregoing, a no mean writer of literature, and a journalist as able as the disadvantage of being a writer of literature permits one to be—Mr. G. K. Chesterton, shall provide the perfect illustration. Mr. Chesterton recently, in a journal edited by his brother, wrote an article in defence of his friend, attacking a newspaper which was running a rival propaganda and which, to boot, had attacked his friend, and—to boot yet again—whose owner was being attacked by the said brother in a sensational campaign calculated to achieve *inter alia* for the said journal of the said brother a very well-merited "business" advertisement. Which seems quite a nice collection of "interested" items to inspire any article. If we give the names: Mr. Cecil Chesterton the brother, Mr. Belloc the friend, Lord Northcliffe the news vendor; and the items: the *Daily Mail* the offender, the *New Witness* for the defence and return onslaught, Mr. Belloc's war-lectures, G. K.'s own sound literary reputation, the "Good—and Gone—old Times," the "Servile State" and the "New Bad Ones," we are in possession of the "argument" and of the *Dramatis Personae*. Let Mr. G. K. Chesterton, journalist, after a prelude concerning buttercups, daisies, Dickens, Pantomime, and the Ultimate Good, speak: his subject: "Truth and the Transformation Scene." "Before the Harlequinade, there came a thing called a Transformation Scene, in which the scenes grew thin and other scenes shone through them, so that one had the delightful sensation of being in two places at once. . . . In front let us say there would be the interior of the widow's cottage with a Dutch clock, a three-legged stool, a mangle, a bedstead, a table or a what not. And you would become gradually aware that the scene was also the Demon's Cave, with a Demon carousing with the Nightmare Queen and glittering cohorts of goblins. The Dutch clock was still there and yet it was less solid than the Demon King. The mangle was still there and yet it was more thin and spectral than the Nightmare. All the facts grew faint as fables and the fables became facts. Moreover it was a great part of the unreason and the vertigo of the vision that the two

complete nowhere corresponded to each other even by accident. . . . Now it is this sense of the two scenes utterly distinct and yet simultaneous which I have when I look at the modern press and modern politics: and see the realities which are the background of modern life gradually glowing and growing through the thin sheets of our modern newspapers. There is the same utter separateness and dislocation between the two designs." With an air of ineffable impartiality the writer proceeds, "It has nothing to do with which world is the better, it is solely a matter of which is becoming the more real. You may like widows or you may prefer demons. . . . The England of to-day is still divided into those who are still looking at Scene One, and those who are already looking at Scene Two. Or rather they can both see both, but they cannot believe both. The front still shows the British Constitution . . . but behind is the goblin's kitchen and the Servile State. Among those who see it there is all kinds of comment: but they see it. The *New Age* sees it, and the *New Witness*, and in its way even the *New Statesman*. But the *Spectator* does not, and the *Pink'Un* does not, and the *Times* does not, or pretends that it does not."

In the passage quoted, it is the remark "It has nothing to do with which world is the better: it is solely a matter of which is becoming the more real. You may like widows or you may prefer demons," which illuminates the method of journalism. Less of the heroic indignation which so becomes a journalist, and a little more of the interest and amusement in himself which Mr. Chesterton shows elsewhere, would have made it obvious to him that everything as far as the meaning of his article at least was concerned, depended upon "which you preferred"; and he himself acknowledges as much when, having to recover his position, he points out a little lower down the page that though we "see both" we cannot "believe both." At the outset in framing the article, the sole reason which caused him to fix upon the simile of the "Transformation Scene"—a most ingenious one—was to assist him to divide the world into two parts: the Goblins he preferred—all his own friends; and the Widows he couldn't abide: those whom he and his friends were inclined to dislike. His prejudices favourable or unfavourable from the architecture of his world: his sole conception of what is "real." He says, "Some of us, he (Mr. Belloc) being one, are interested in things as they really are." Really are! He means "things as he would like them." His Oncoming Scene—his real world, the "true" world, the world of fight and right are—all his personal friends, those of the *New Witness*, the *New Age*, the *New Statesman* even: "even" because this maintains the sinning faith which seeks to inaugurate that Servile State which vexes him so, but which must "even" be included because it is not possible to exclude Friend Shaw. Those whom he loves not he leaves without even a world to live in. "I could not debate with the *Mail* writer because I do not believe in the very existence of the world in which he lives." "Not believe in" = have no liking for. "Could not debate" = would not debate. No one supposes that he could not—if he tried—with kindness and a motherly patience, to explain to the hapless scribbler who is left with no world to live in why the world as it "is" for Mr. Belloc "is," while the world as it is for Lord Northcliffe just—"is'nt" ! But Mr. Chesterton is very annoyed indeed, and he won't. For the time being, he is so bent on championing "the responsible human being who is working for the 'Truth'" that he prefers to lose all his community of intelligence with the same sort of being "who is working for the Trust." He would not even consider that perhaps both after their own fashion are working for themselves. To the finish, he sticks to the disparate worlds of his Transformation Scene, though it is maybe a sign of a returning breadth of human interest that

causes him to get his metaphors mixed. "The skeleton begins to shine through the cupboard, and what was the house of men opens inward into the house of devils." Well! well! it does make one think about the desirability of the shoemaker sticking to his last. Mr. Chesterton has neither the cunning nor the maliciousness: not perhaps the "hardness" which is required to work that sort of thing into the form in which it would be really effective for his own or really damaging to the opposing side. Mr. Belloc could manipulate it far better. He merely deserts the service of "Truth" to lend its prestige to dubious uses which lower it as inevitably as the prestige of science would be lowered by a scientist of repute who lent his prestige to bolster up the fortunes of some dubitable commercial undertaking.

Which ruminations are set forth as a caution: for the guidance mainly of—the "Egoist."

D. M.

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