

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle
Baum Henry Flaubert Nietzsche Willis
Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Voltaire Cooke
Poe Aristotle Wells Bunner Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Hale James Hastings Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
Doré Dante Pushkin Alcott
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**Essays in English Literature,
1780-1860**

George Saintsbury

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: George Saintsbury

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8472-2408-2

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ESSAYS
IN
ENGLISH LITERATURE
1780-1860
BY
GEORGE SAINTSBURY

PERCIVAL AND CO.
KING STREET, COVENT GARDEN
London
1890

{v}

PREFACE

Of the essays in this volume, the introductory paper on "The Kinds of Criticism" has not before appeared in print. All the rest, with one exception (the Essay on Lockhart which appeared in the *National Review*), were originally published in *Macmillan's Magazine*. To the Editors and Publishers of both these periodicals I owe my best thanks for permission to reprint the articles. To the Editor of *Macmillan's Magazine* in particular (to whom, if dedications were not somewhat in ill odour, I should, in memory of friendship old and new, have dedicated the book), I am further indebted for suggesting several of the subjects as well as accepting the essays. These appear in the main as they appeared; {vi} but I have not scrupled to alter phrase or substance where it seemed desirable, and I have in a few places restored passages which had been sacrificed to the usual exigencies of space. In two cases, those of Lockhart and De Quincey, I have thought it best to discuss, in a brief appendix, some questions which have presented themselves since the original publications. In consequence of these alterations and additions as well as for other reasons, it may be convenient to give the dates and places of the original appearance of each essay. They are as follows:—

Lockhart, *National Review*, Aug. 1884. Borrow, *Macmillan's Magazine*, Jan. 1886. Peacock, do. April 1886. Wilson (under the title of "Christopher North"), do. July 1886. Hazlitt, do. March 1887. Jeffrey, do. August 1887. Moore, do. March 1888. Sydney Smith, do. May 1888. Praed, do. Sept. 1888. Leigh Hunt, do. April 1889. Crabbe, do. June 1889. Hogg, do. Sept. 1889. De Quincey, do. June 1890.

The present order is chronological, following the birth-years of the authors discussed.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY –

The Kinds of Criticism

- I. Crabbe
- II. Hogg
- III. Sydney Smith
- IV. Jeffrey
- V. Hazlitt
- VI. Moore
- VII. Leigh Hunt
- VIII. Peacock
- IX. Wilson
- X. De Quincey
- XI. Lockhart
- XII. Praed
- XIII. Borrow

APPENDIX –

- A. De Quincey
- B. Lockhart

INDEX

{ix}

INTRODUCTION

THE KINDS OF CRITICISM

It is probably unnecessary, and might possibly be impertinent, to renew here at any length the old debate between reviewers as reviewers, and reviewers as authors—the debate whether the reissue of work contributed to periodicals is desirable or not. The plea that half the best prose literature of this century would be inaccessible if the practice had been forbidden, and the retort that anything which can pretend to keep company with the best literature of the century will be readily relieved from the objection, at once sum up the whole quarrel, and leave it undecided. For my own part, I think that there is a sufficient connection of subject in the following chapters, and I hope that there is a sufficient uniformity of treatment. The former point, as the least important, may be dismissed first. All the literature here discussed is—with the exception of Crabbe's earliest poems, and the late aftermath of Peacock and Borrow—work of one and the same period, {x} the first half of the present century. The authors criticised were all contemporaries; with only one exception, if with one, they were all writing more or less busily within a single decade, that of 1820 to 1830. And they have the further connection (which has at least the reality of having been present to my mind in selecting them), that while every one of them was a man of great literary power, hardly one has been by general consent, or except by private crotchet would be, put among the very greatest. They stand not far below, but distinctly below, Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, and Keats. Yet again, they agree in the fact that hardly one of them has yet been securely set in the literary niche which is his due, all having been at some time either unduly valued or unduly neglected, and one or two never having yet received even due appreciation. The greatest of all critics was accused, unjustly, of having a certain dislike of clear, undoubted supremacy. It would be far more fair to say that Sainte-Beuve had eminently, what perhaps all critics who are not mere carpers on the one hand, or mere splashers of superlatives on the other, have more or less—an affection for subjects possessing but qualified merit, and so giving to

criticism a certain additional interest in the task of placing and appraising them.

This last sentence may not meet with universal assent, but it will bring me conveniently to the {xi} second part of my subject. I should not have republished these essays if I had not thought that, whatever may be their faults (and a man who does not see the faults of his own writing on revising it a second time for the press after an interval, must be either a great genius or an intolerable fool), they possess a certain unity of critical method. Nor should I have republished them if it had seemed to me that this method was exactly identical with that of any other critic of the present day in England. I have at least endeavoured to wear my rue with a difference, and that not merely for the sake of differing.

Mr. Goldwin Smith, whose work is not likely to be impeached for defect either in form or in substance, wrote but a few months ago, in melancholy mood, that the province of criticism appeared to be now limited to the saying of fine things. I agree with him that this is one vicious extreme of the popular conception of the art; but in order to define correctly, we cannot be contented with one only. The other, as it seems to me, is fixed by the notion, now warmly championed by some younger critics both at home and abroad, that criticism must be of all things "scientific." For my own part, I have gravely and strenuously endeavoured to ascertain from the writings both of foreign critics (the chief of whom was the late M. Hennequin in France), and of their disciples at home, what "scientific" criticism means. In no case have {xii} I been able to obtain any clear conception of its connotation in the mouths or minds of those who use the phrase. The new heaven and the new earth which they promise are no doubt to be very different from our own old earth and heaven; of that they are sure, and their sureness does not fail to make itself plain. But what the flora and fauna, the biology and geology of the new heaven and earth are to be, I have never succeeded in ascertaining. The country would appear to be like that Land of Ignorance which, as Lord Brooke says, "none can describe until he be past it." Only I have perceived that when this "scientific" criticism sticks closest to its own formulas and ways, it appears to me to be very bad criticism; and that when, as sometimes happens, it is good criticism, its ways and formulas are not perceptibly distinguishable

from those of criticism which is not "scientific." For the rest, it is all but demonstrable that "scientific" literary criticism is impossible, unless the word "scientific" is to have its meaning very illegitimately altered. For the essential qualities of literature, as of all art, are communicated by the individual, they depend upon idiosyncrasy: and this makes science in any proper sense powerless. *She* can deal only with classes, only with general laws; and so long as these classes are constantly reduced to "species of one," and these laws are set at nought by incalculable and singular influences, she must be constantly baffled and find all her {xiii} elaborate plant of formulas and generalisations useless. Of course, there are generalisations possible in literature, and to such I may return presently; but scientific criticism of literature must always be a contradiction in terms. You may to some considerable extent ascertain the general laws of language, of metre, of music, as applied to verbal rhythm and cadence; you may classify the subjects which appeal to the general, and further classify their particular manners of appeal; you may arrange the most ingenious "product-of-the-circumstances" theories about race, climate, religion. But always sooner or later, and much more often sooner than later, the mocking demon of the individual, or, if a different phrase be preferred, the great and splendid mystery of the idiosyncrasy of the artist, will meet and baffle you. You will find that on the showing of this science falsely so called, there is no reason why Chapelain should not be a poet, and none why Shakespeare is. You will ask science in vain to tell you why some dozen or sixteen of the simplest words in language arranged by one man or in one fashion, why a certain number of dabs of colour arranged by another man or in another fashion, make a permanent addition to the delight of the world, while other words and other dabs of colour, differently arranged by others, do not. To put the matter yet otherwise, the whole end, aim, and object of literature and the criticism of literature, as of all art, and {xiv} the criticism of all art, is beauty and the enjoyment of beauty. With beauty science has absolutely nothing to do.

It is no doubt the sense, conscious or unconscious, of this that has inclined men to that other conception of criticism as a saying of fine things, of which Mr. Goldwin Smith complains, and which certainly has many votaries, in most countries at the present day. These vota-

ries have their various kinds. There is the critic who simply uses his subject as a sort of springboard or platform, on and from which to display his natural grace and agility, his urbane learning, his faculty of pleasant wit. This is perhaps the most popular of all critics, and no age has ever had better examples of him than this age. There is a more serious kind who founds on his subject (if indeed founding be not too solemn a term) elaborate descants, makes it the theme of complicated variations. There is a third, closely allied to him, who seeks in it apparently first of all, and sometimes with no further aim, an opportunity for the display of style. And lastly (though as usual all these kinds pervade and melt into one another, so that, while in any individual one may prevail, it is rare to find an individual in whom that one is alone present) there is the purely impressionist critic who endeavours in his own way to show the impression which the subject has, or which he chooses to represent that it has, produced on him. This last is in a better case than the others; but still he, as it seems to me, {xv} misses the full and proper office of the critic, though he may have an agreeable and even useful function of his own.

For the full and proper office of the critic (again as it seems to me) can never be discharged except by those who remember that "critic" means "judge." Expressions of personal liking, though they can hardly be kept out of criticism, are not by themselves judgment. The famous "J'aime mieux Alfred de Musset," though it came from a man of extraordinary mental power and no small specially critical ability, is not criticism. Mere *obiter dicta* of any kind, though they may be most agreeable and even most legitimate sets-off to critical conversation, are not criticism. The most admirable discourses from the merely literary point of view on taste, Shakespeare, and the musical glasses, with some parenthetical reference to the matter in hand, are not criticism. There must be at least some attempt to take in and render the whole virtue of the subjects considered, some effort to compare them with their likes in other as well as the same languages, some endeavour to class and value them. And as a condition preliminary to this process, there must, I think, be a not inconsiderable study of widely differing periods, forms, manners, of literature itself. The test question, as I should put it, of the value of criticism is "What idea of the original would this critic give to a

tolerably instructed person who did not know that original?" And again, "How far has this critic seen {xvi} steadily and seen whole, the subject which he has set himself to consider? How far has he referred the main peculiarities of that subject to their proximate causes and effects? How far has he attempted to place, and succeeded in placing, the subject in the general history of literature, in the particular history of its own language, in the collection of authors of its own department?" How far, in short, has he applied what I may perhaps be excused for calling the comparative method in literature to the particular instance? I have read very famous and in their way very accomplished examples of literature ostensibly critical, in which few if any of these questions seem to have been even considered by the critic. He may have said many pretty things; he may have shown what a clever fellow he is; he may have in his own person contributed good literature to swell the literary sum. But has he done anything to aid the general grasp of that literary sum, to place his man under certain lights and in certain aspects, with due allowance for the possibility of other aspects and other lights? Very often, I think, it must be admitted that he has not. I should be the first to admit that my own attempts to do this are unsuccessful and faulty; and I only plead for them that they are such attempts, and that they have been made on the basis of tolerably wide and tolerably careful reading. {xvii}

For, after all, it is this reading which is the main and principal thing. It will not of course by itself make a critic; but few are the critics that will ever be made without it. We have at this moment an awful example of an exceedingly clever writer who has commenced critic, disdaining this preparation. Some of my friends jeer or comminate at Mr. Howells; for my part I only shudder and echo the celebrated "There, but for the grace of God." Here is a clever man, a very clever man, an excellent though of late years slightly depraved practitioner in one branch of art, who, suddenly and without preparation, takes to another, and becomes a spectacle to men and angels. I hope that we shall one day have a collection of Mr. Howells's critical *dicta* on novels and other things; they will be one of the most valuable, one of the most terrible of books as showing what happens when a man speaks without knowledge. To read what Mr. Howells says of Mr. Thackeray is almost an illiberal education. The

reason of the error is quite obvious. It is simply that the clever American does not know; he has not sufficient range of comparison. For my own part, I should not dare to continue criticising so much as a circulating library novel, if I did not perpetually pay my respects to the classics of many literatures: and I am not sure that I do not appreciate the classics of many literatures all the better from my not infrequent reading of circulating library novels. {xviii}

The only objection of validity that I have ever seen taken to what I have ventured to call comparative criticism, is that it proceeds too much, as the most learned of living French critics once observed of an English writer, *par cases et par compartiments*, that is to say, as I understand M. Brunetière, with a rather too methodical classification. This, however, was written some seven or eight years ago, and since then I have found M. Brunetière speaking about critical method as distinguished from the science of criticism, and insisting on the necessity of comparison, not less positively, and no doubt with far more authority, than I have done myself. Yet I half think that M. Brunetière, like most of us, does not practise quite up to the level of his preaching; and I should say that on mediæval literature, on Romantic literature, and on some other things, his own excellent censorship might be further improved by a still more catholic sympathy, and a still more constant habit of looking at everything and every writer in conjunction with their analogues and their opposites in the same and other literatures. This constant reference of comparison may indeed stand in the way of those flowing deliverances of personal opinion, in more or less agreeable language, which are perhaps, or rather certainly, what is most popular in criticism; I do not think that they will ever stand in the way of criticism proper. As I understand that long and difficult art, its end, as far as the individual {xix} is concerned, is to provide the mind with a sort of conspectus of literature, as a good atlas thoroughly conned provides a man with a conspectus of the *orbis terrarum*. To the man with a geographical head, the mention of a place at once suggests its bearings to other places, its history, its products, all its relations in short; to the man with a critical head, the mention of a book or an author should call up a similar mental picture. The picture, indeed, will never be as complete in the one instance as in the other, because the intellect and the artistic faculty of man are far vaster than this plan-

et, far more diverse, far more intricately and perplexingly arranged than all its abundant material dispositions and products. The life of Methuselah and the mind of Shakespeare together could hardly take the whole of critical knowledge to be their joint province. But the area of survey may be constantly increased; the particularity of knowledge constantly made more minute.

Another objection, more fantastic in appearance but rather attractive in its way, is that the comparative critic becomes too much of a universal lover, and too little of an enthusiast, that he has an irritating and ungentlemanly habit of seeing blemishes in the greatest, a pottering and peddling fancy for discovering beauties in the most insignificant; that he lacks the exclusiveness and the fastidiousness of intellectual aristocracy, the fervour and rapture of æsthetic passion. To {xx} this, one can answer little more than, "It may be so." Certainly the critic of this kind will very rarely be able to indulge in the *engouement* which is the apparent delight of some of his class. He will deal very cautiously in superlatives, and his commendations, when he gives them, will sometimes have, to more gushing persons, the slightly ludicrous air which attached to the modest boast of somebody that he was "the third best authority in England on gray shirtings." On the other hand, the critic of this kind will not be able to neglect the uninteresting with the serene nonchalance of some of his fellows. He will sometimes have to look back on days and months and years of laborious reading and say to himself, "Were it not well for us, as others use, to take all this for granted?" But to say this is to say no more than that the thorough-going practice of any art and mystery involves a great deal of tedious, thankless, and even positively fruitless work, brushes away a good many illusions, and interferes a good deal with personal comfort. Cockaigne is a delightful country, and the Cockaigne of criticism is as agreeable as the other provinces. But none of these provinces has usually been accounted a wise man's paradise.

It may be asked, "What is the end which you propose for this comparative reading? A method must lead somewhere; whither does this method lead? or does it lead only to statistics and classifications?" Certainly it does not, or at {xxi} least should not. It leads, like all method, to generalisations which, though as I have said I do not believe that they have attained or ever will attain the character

of science, at least throw no small light and interest on the study of literature as a whole, and of its examples as particulars. It gives, I think (speaking as a fool), a constantly greater power of distinguishing good work from bad work, by giving constantly nearer approach (though perhaps it may never wholly and finally attain) to the knowledge of the exact characteristics which distinguish the two. And the way in which it does this is by a constant process of weakening or strengthening, as the case may be, the less or more correct generalisations with which the critic starts, or which he forms in the early days of his reading. There has often been brought against some great critics the charge that their critical standards have altered at different times of their career. This simply means that they have been constantly applying the comparative method, and profiting by the application. After all, there are few, though there are some, absolute truths in criticism; and a man will often be relatively right in condemning, from certain aspects and in certain combinations, work which, under other aspects and in other combinations, he has been relatively quite as right in admiring. Occasionally, no doubt, there will be an apparent exception to the rule of critical development, as in the case of Hazlitt: {xvii} but that remarkable exception does not fail to justify the rule. For in truth, Hazlitt's critical range was not so wide as his penetration was deep; and he avows, almost exultingly, that after a comparatively early time of life, he practically left off reading. That is to say, he carefully avoided renewing his plant, and he usually eschewed new material—conditions which, no doubt, conduce to the uniformity, and, within obvious limits, are not prejudicial to the excellence of the product.

It is possible that the title "The Kinds of Criticism" may have excited in some readers expectations of the discussion of a subject which has not yet been handled. We have recently seen revived the sempiternal argument between authors and critics—an argument in which it may be as well to say that the present writer has not yet taken part either anonymously or otherwise. The authors, or some of them, have remarked that they have never personally benefited by criticism; and the critics, after their disagreeable way, have retorted that this was obvious. A critic of great ingenuity, my friend Mr. Andrew Lang, has, with his usual humour, suggested that crit-

ics and reviewers are two different kinds, and have nothing to do with each other essentially, though accidentally, and in the imperfect arrangements of the world, the discharge of their functions may happen to be combined in the same person. As a matter of practice, this is no doubt too often the case; as a matter {xxiii} of theory, nothing ought much less to be the case. I think that if I were dictator, one of the first non-political things that I should do, would be to make the order of reviewers as close a one, at least, as the bench of judges, or the staff of the Mint, or of any public establishment of a similar character. That any large amount of reviewing is determined by fear or favour is a general idea which has little more basis than a good many other general ideas. But that a very large amount of reviewing is determined by doubtless well-meaning incompetence, there is no doubt whatever. It is on the whole the most difficult kind of newspaper writing, and it is on the whole the most lightly assigned and the most irresponsibly performed. I have heard of newspapers where the reviews depended almost wholly on the accident of some of the staff taking a holiday, or being laid for a time on the shelf, or being considered not up to other work; of others, though this I own is scarcely credible, where the whole reviewing was farmed out to a manager, to be allotted to devils as good to him seemed; of many where the reviews were a sort of exercising-ground on which novices were trained, broken-down hacks turned out to grass, and invalids allowed a little gentle exercise. And I know of not a few papers and not a few reviewers in which and by whom, errors and accidents excepted, the best work possible is given to one of the most important kinds of work. Of common {xxiv} mistakes on the subject, which are not merely silly crazes, such as the log-rolling craze and the five-pound note craze and the like, the worst known to me, though it is shared by some who should know better, is that a specialist is the best reviewer. I do not say that he is always the worst; but that is about as far as my charity, informed by much experience, can go. Even if he has no special craze or megrim, and does not decide offhand that a man is hopeless because he calls Charles the Great Charlemagne, or *vice versâ*, he is constantly out of focus. The perfect reviewer would be (and the only reviewer whose reviews are worth reading is he who more or less approximates to this ideal) the Platonic or pseudo-Platonic philosopher who is "second best in everything," who has enough special knowledge not to miss merits

or defects, and enough general knowledge to estimate the particular subject at, and not above, its relative value to the whole. There have been good critics who were unable to bring themselves down to the mere reading of ephemeral work, but I do not think they were the better for this; I am sure that there never was a good reviewer, even of the lowest trash, who was not *in posse* or *in esse* a good critic of the highest and most enduring literature. The writer of funny articles, and the "slater," and the intelligent *compte-rendu* man, and the person who writes six columns on the general theory of poetry when he professes to review Mr. Apollo's last book, may do all these things well and {xxv} not be good critics; but then all these things may be done, and done well, and yet not be good reviews.

Whether the reviewer and the critic are valuable members of society or useless encumbrances, must be questions left to the decision of the world at large, which apparently is not in a hurry to decide either way. There are, no doubt, certain things that the critic, whether he be critic major or critic minor, Sainte-Beuve or Mr. Gall, cannot do. He cannot certainly, and for the present, sell or prevent the sale of a book. "You slated this and it has gone through twenty editions" is not a more uncommon remark than the other, "They slated that and you extol it to the skies." Both, as generally urged, rest on fallacy. In the first case, nothing was probably farther from the critic's intention than to say "this book is not popular"; the most that he intended was "this book is not good." In the second case, it has been discovered of late (it is one of the few things that we have discovered) that very rarely has any really good thing, even in the most famous or infamous attacks on it, been attacked, even with a shadow of success, for its goodness. The critics were severe on Byron's faults, on Keats's faults, and on the present Laureate's faults; they were seldom severe on their goodness, though they often failed to appreciate it fully.

This, however, is in one sense a digression, for there is no criticism of contemporary work in this {xxvi} volume. I think, however, as I have just endeavoured to point out, that criticism of contemporary work and criticism of classics should proceed on the same lines, and I think that both require the same qualities and the same outfit. Nor am I certain that if narrow inquiry were made, some of the best criticism in all times and in all languages would not be

found in the merest casual reviewing. That in all cases the critic must start from a wide comparative study of different languages and literatures, is the first position to be laid down. In the next place he must, I think, constantly refer back his sensations of agreement and disagreement, of liking and disliking, in the same comparative fashion. "Why do I like the *Agamemnon* and dislike Mr. Dash's five-act tragedy?" is a question to be constantly put, and to be answered only by a pretty close personal inquiry as to what "I" really do like in the *Agamemnon* and do dislike in Mr. Dash. And in answering it, it will hardly be possible to consider too large a number of instances of all degrees of merit, from Aeschylus himself to Mr. Dash himself, of all languages, of all times. Let Englishmen be compared with Englishmen of other times to bring out this set of differences, with foreigners of modern times to bring out that, with Greeks and Romans to bring out the other. Let poets of old days be compared with poets of new, classics with romantics, rhymed with unrhymed. Let the straitest doctrinaire {xxvii} criticism of men of talent like Boileau and simpletons like Rymer be compared with the fullest appreciations of Coleridge and Hazlitt, of Sainte-Beuve and Mr. Arnold. "Compare, always compare" is the first axiom of criticism. [1]

The second, I think, is "Always make sure, as far as you possibly can, that what you like and dislike is the literary and not the extra-literary character of the matter under examination." Make sure, that is to say, that admiration for the author is not due to his having taken care that the Whig dogs or the Tory dogs shall not have the best of it, to his having written as a gentleman for gentlemen, or as an uneasy anti-aristocrat for uneasy anti-aristocrats, as a believer (fervent or acquiescent) in the supernatural, or as a person {xxviii} who lays it down that miracles do not happen, as an Englishman or a Frenchman, a classic or a romantic. Very difficult indeed is the chase and discovery of these enemies: for extra-literary prejudices are as cunning as winter hares or leaf-insects, in disguising themselves by simulating literary forms.

Lastly, never be content without at least endeavouring to connect cause and effect in some way, without giving something like a reason for the faith that is in you. No doubt the critic will often be tempted, will sometimes be actually forced to say, "'J'aime mieux Alfred de Musset,' and there's an end of it." All the imperfect kinds,

as they seem to me, of criticism are recommended by the fact that they are, unlike some other literary matter, not only easier writing but also easier reading. The agreeable exercises of style where adjectives meet substantives to whom they never thought they could possibly be introduced (as a certain naughty wit has it), the pleasant chatter about personal reminiscences, the flowers of rhetoric, the fruits of wit, may not be easy, but they are at any rate easier than fashioning some intelligent and intelligible response to the perpetual "Why?" the *quare stans* of criticism.

In the following pages, I shall no doubt be found, like other people, to have come very far short of my own ideal, and my own precepts. I may even say that I have knowingly and intentionally come short of them to some extent. Biographical {xxix} and anecdotic detail has, I believe, much less to do with the real appreciation of the literary value of an author than is generally thought. In rare instances, it throws a light, but the examples in which we know practically nothing at all, as in that of Shakespeare, or only a few leading facts as in that of Dante, are not those in which criticism is least useful or least satisfactory. At the same time biographical and anecdotic details please most people, and if they are not allowed to shoulder out criticism altogether, there can be no harm in them. For myself, I should like to have the whole works of every author of merit, and I should care little to know anything whatever about his life; but that is a mere private opinion and possibly a private crotchet. Accordingly some space has been given in most of these Essays to a sketch of the life of the subject. Nor has it seemed advisable (except as a matter of necessary, but very occasional, digression) to argue at length upon abstract and general questions such as the definition of poetry, or the kinds and limits of the novel. Large as is the body of criticism so-called which the last hundred years have seen, it may be doubted whether there is even yet accumulated a sufficient *corpus* of really critical discussion of individuals. If I have in these Essays contributed even a very little to such an accumulation, I shall have done that which I purposed. {1}