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of Arcady
30 and of its woods which Yeats thought dead
I think instead

of all the gone faces
getting off at midtown places
with their hats and their jobs
35 and of that lost book I had
with its blue cover and its white inside
where a pencilhand had written
HORSEMAN, PASS BY!

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DOCUMENT B.

Edith Wharton, extract from 'The Vice of Reading' in *North American Review* 177 (Oct. 1903, p. 513-21), p. 517-520.

5 It is a part of the whole duty of the mechanical reader to pronounce an opinion on every book he reads, and he is sometimes driven to strange shifts in the conscientious performance of this task. It is his nature to mistrust and dislike every book he does not understand. "I cannot read and therefore wish all books burned." In his heart of hearts the mechanical reader may sometimes echo this wish of Envy in Doctor Faustus; but, it being also a part of his duty to be "fond of reading," he is obliged to repress his bibliocidal impulse, and go through the form of trying the case, when lynching would have been so much simpler.

10 It is only natural that the reader who looks on reading as a moral obligation should confound moral and intellectual judgments. Here is a book that every one is talking about; the number of its editions is an almost unanswerable proof of its merit; but to the mechanical reader it is cryptic, and he takes refuge in disapproval. He admits the cleverness, of course; but one of the characters is "not nice"; *ergo*, the book is not nice; he is surprised that you should have cared to read it. The mechanical reader, after a few such experiments, learns the potency of disapproval as a critical weapon, and it soon becomes his chief defence against the
15 irritating demand to admire what he cannot understand. Sometimes his disapprobation is tempered by philosophic concessions to human laxity: as in the case of the lady who could not approve of Balzac's novels, but was of course willing to admit that "they were written in the most beautiful French." A fine instance of this temperate disapproval is furnished by Mrs. Barbauld's verdict upon *The Ancient Mariner*: she "pronounced it improbable."

20 The obligation of expressing an opinion on every book which is being talked about has led to the reprehensible but natural habit of borrowing opinions. Any one who frequents a group of mechanical readers soon becomes accustomed to their socialistic use of certain formulas, and to the rapid process of erosion and distortion undergone by much-borrowed opinions. There have been known persons heartless enough to find pleasure in taking the mechanical
25 reader unawares with the demand for an opinion; and it must be owned that the result sometimes justifies the theory that no sports are so diverting as those which are seasoned with cruelty. In such extremities, the expedients resorted to by mechanical readers often do justice to their inventiveness; as when a lady, on being suddenly asked what she thought of "*Quo Vadis*," replied that she had no fault to find with the book except that "nothing happened in
30 it."

35 Thus far the subject has dealt only with what may be called the average mechanical reader: a designation embracing the immense majority of book-consumers. There is, however, another and more striking type of mechanical reader -- he who, wearying of the Philistine diversion of "understanding the obvious," boldly threads his way "amid the bitterness of things occult." Transcendentalism owes much of its perennial popularity to a reverence for the unintelligible, and its disciples are largely recruited from the class of readers who consider it as great an intellectual feat to read a book as to understand it. But these votaries of the esoteric are too few in number to be harmful. It is the average mechanical reader who really endangers the integrity of letters; this may seem a curious charge to bring against that
40 voracious majority. How can those who create the demand for the hundredth thousand be accused of malice toward letters?

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45 In that acute character-study, "Manoeuvring," Miss Edgeworth says of one of her characters: "Her mind had never been overwhelmed by a torrent of wasteful learning. That the stream of literature had passed over it was apparent only from its fertility." There could hardly be a happier description of those who read intuitively; and its antithesis as fitly portrays the mechanical reader. His mind is devastated by that torrent of wasteful learning which his demands have helped to swell. It is probable that if no one read but those who know how to read, none would produce books but those who know how to write; but it is the least offence of the mechanical reader to have encouraged the mechanical author. The two were made for each other and may prey on one another with impunity.

50 The harmfulness of the mechanical reader is fourfold. In the first place, by bringing about the demand for mediocre writing, he facilitates the career of the mediocre author. The crime of luring creative talent into the ranks of mechanical production is in fact the gravest offence of the mechanical reader.

55 Secondly, by his passion for "popular" renderings of abstruse and difficult subjects, by confounding the hastiest *réchauffé* of scientific truisms with the slowly-matured conceptions of the original thinker, he retards true culture and lessens the possible amount of really abiding work.

60 The habit of confusing moral and intellectual judgments is the third cause of his harmfulness to literature. The inadequacy of "art for art's sake" as a literary creed has long been conceded. It is not by requiring that the imaginative writer shall be touched "to fine issues" that the mechanical reader interferes with the production of masterpieces, but by his own inability to discern the "fine issues" of any book, however great, which presents some incidental stumbling-block to his vision. To those who regard literature as a criticism of life, nothing is more puzzling than this incapacity to distinguish between the general tendency of a book -- its technical and imaginative value as a whole -- and its merely episodic features. That the mechanical reader should confound the unmoral with the immoral is perhaps natural; he may be pardoned for an erroneous classification of such books as "*La Chartreuse de Parme*" or the "Life of Benvenuto Cellini"; his harmfulness to literature lies in his persistent ignorance of the fact that any serious portrayal of life must be judged not by the incidents it presents but by the author's sense of their significance. The harmful book is the trivial book: it depends on the writer, and not on the subject, whether the contemplation of life results in Faust or Faublas. To gauge the absence of this perception in the average reader, one must turn to the ordinary "improper" book of current English and American fiction. In these works, 65 enjoyed under protest, with the plea that they are "unpleasant, but so powerful," one sees the reflection of the image which the great portrayals of life leave on the minds of the mechanical reader and his novelist. There is the collocation of "painful" incidents; but the rest, being unperceived, is left out.

70 Finally, the mechanical reader, by his demand for peptonised literature, and his inability to distinguish between the means and the end, has misdirected the tendencies of criticism, or rather, has produced a creature in his own image -- the mechanical critic. The London correspondent of a New York paper recently quoted a "well-known English reviewer" as saying that people no longer had time to read critical analyses of books -- that what they wanted was a *résumé* of the contents. It is of course an open question (and hardly within the scope of this argument) how much literature is benefited by criticism; but to speak as though the analysis of a book were one kind of criticism and the cataloguing of its contents another, is a manifest absurdity. The born reader may or may not wish to hear what the critics have to say of a book; but if he cares for any criticism he wants the only kind worthy of the name -- an analysis of subject and manner. He who has no time for such criticism will certainly spare 85

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90 none to the summing-up of the contents of a book: an inventory of its incidents, ending up
with the conventional "But we will not spoil the reader's enjoyment by revealing, etc." It is the
mechanical reader who demands such inventories and calls them criticisms; and it is because
the mechanical reader is in the majority that the mechanical plot-extractor is fast superseding
the critic. Whether real criticism be of service to literature or not, it is clear that this pseudo-
95 reviewing is harmful, since it places books of very different qualities on the same dead level
of mediocrity, by ignoring their true purport and significance. It is impossible to give an idea
of the value of any book, except perhaps a detective-story, by the recapitulation of its
contents; and even those qualities which differentiate the good from the bad detective-story
lie not so much in the collocation of incidents as in the handling of the subject and the choice
100 of means used for producing a given effect. All forms of art are based on the principle of
selection, and where that principle is held of no account in the sum-total of any intellectual
production, there can be no genuine criticism.

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DOCUMENT C.

***Beatrice* (1895), a painting by Marie Spartali Stillman (1844-1927). Original dimensions: 22.6 x 17 in. Delaware Art Museum.**

