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## LETTERS AND MORALS

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I HAVE been asked to give my view on the relation of morality to literature. Having received such a compliment from the editor of a philosophical journal, I have an uneasy feeling that I am expected to plunge into the metaphysical abstractions of aesthetics and to wear the airs of learning and profound thought. To avoid embarrassment all around, and by way of apology, I suppose it would be best to say at the start that I have long ago given over all analytic speculation on this ticklish question in the manner of Kleutgen. Not that I am too big for Kleutgen. On the contrary, Kleutgen is too big for me. I rise, so to speak, in an assembly of pundits to tell the results of my simple experiences, and feeling somewhat like a curious specimen about to be impaled for the inspection and laughter of the learned.

As the matter presents itself to me, there is no necessary connection between morality and literature. Good literature can be very bad. There would be no danger to our soul's well-being if literature, to be good at all, had to be morally good as well as artistically good. I wish it were so. But one cannot deny the evidence. As far as the evidence goes, I am constrained to think that, within certain limits, the best literature can be the worst, and the worst the best. I have no doubt that a nice moral sense, still in an uncritical and unformed stage, can get more

harm from the *Atlantic Monthly* than from the *Globe-Democrat* or the *Post-Dispatch*. A taste for detective stories is much safer than a taste for Shaw. I should feel happier over the ultimate security of a passionate lover of Edgar Guest than over a passionate lover of Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The fact that dispensations are given to teachers of literature to read forbidden books for the sake of their literary quality would seem to indicate a recognition, on the part of custodians of morals, that a book may be good from a literary point of view when it is bad from a moral point of view. I am so clear in my own mind about the devastating possibilities of good literature in the regions of the soul that I should be painfully concerned over a tendency on the part of anyone to make much use of the liberal privilege of dispensations. It has been noted how Ernest Renan read himself out of the Church, while Newman read himself into it. It is far easier to read one's self out of the Church. One does not need so subtle a mind, so firm and lofty a character. A dispensation is like a military permission to investigate the firing zone, which saves you from courtmartial but is no guarantee against flying bullets. Happy the man who can be so sure of his serious purpose, cautious temper, and cool head that he feels safe with a dispensation under his arm.