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# Literature and Criticism

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# LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

In these days of "scientific method," when there is so little literary activity of a genuinely critical sort, it is a good deal easier to say in what such activity does not, than in what it does, consist. That literary criticism is not identical with a study of words or language, or yet of texts or "documents"; that it is not to be confounded with philology or with the exploration of origins or derivations, or the investigation of manuscripts, or a determination of the details of literary history—all this ought to be reasonably clear on the face of it, and when stated in so many words, would probably be conceded even by those who have done most to cause the present confusion. That such subjects and pursuits are very interesting, very important in their way, there is no gainsaying. The study of etymology alone has been of great, if indirect, assistance in the comprehension of literature, although to an hundred etymologists there is probably no more than one good critic. But still literature is something more than words and lives with another life than theirs; they are but the appurtenances, and neither phonology nor phonetics will ever furnish the basis for a satisfactory criticism of literature, any more than a chemistry of pigments will suffice for a criticism of painting.

Nor is this general statement less applicable to the study of "literary" than of linguistic sources, rudiments, and developments, however useful the former, like the latter, to the indirect appreciation of literature. Unfortunately it is only too easy to overrate the importance of primitive and dialectic "literature"—of "communal poetry," for example, or the early Germanic

"epic"; or rather, to rate them in inappropriate and misleading terms. Even the name *literature* in such a connection must be taken in a cautious and qualified way; since it is just the want of a term to distinguish the "documentary" from the literary, which has confirmed, if it has not induced, the current misapprehension. That a piece of writing may have a relative or historical value without any absolute or literary value, is anything but an uncommon occurrence; indeed, most writing is of this kind. On the contrary, it happens only too often that this tentative and rudimentary "literature," these gropings and strayings of an immature or defective culture, which we are naïvely expected to admire nowadays, are perfectly indifferent to criticism—that is, to a better sense of the permanent significance of life, and are of interest solely to scholarship—that is, to a knowledge and reconstruction of the past. For such, after all, is essentially the difference between the functions of scholarship and of criticism: the former seeks to determine the fact; the latter, to interpret it. While scholarship endeavours to reconstitute the past in its habit as it lived; criticism attempts to liberate the idea, to set free the message it has to communicate. In this sense scholarship is "scientific," if one likes the word; it deals with facts, with the thing itself; it is impersonal and in its own manner final. Its results, when once obtained, are definitive and are taken up into the common stock of information, though their original form and method may be superseded and forgotten. On the other hand, criticism, as an affair of ideas, is necessarily individual and relative; for although literature is itself essentially in the nature of a permanent contribution to human experience, its application will vary from one generation to another and its interpretation will change with the age—to say nothing of the farther circumstance that its meaning is always exposed to a personal reaction. How close the connection, then, between scholarship and criticism, is at once apparent. But though it is perhaps no wonder under the circumstances that the two offices of verification and interpretation should be confounded—particularly in view of the unwarrantable extension which has been given of late years to the province of philology; yet the two are, in reality, distinct, and the integrity of our thought requires that they should be kept so.

In this way the remains of Gothic, consisting of a few biblical translations and a legal instrument or two, constituted an

historical find of some importance since they served to fill a gap in our knowledge of the Germanic dialects; but as literature they are naught, and may be neglected by a sound criticism without our suffering the slightest intellectual inconvenience or the smallest arrest of moral growth. Even *Beowulf* itself, that venerable monument of Teutonic ingenuousness, is, I believe, more interesting as history than as literature, though treated with exaggerated respect by our modern philological scholarship. At all events it ought to be spoken of in other and more moderate terms than its admirers commonly use of it, as though it were in any sense comparable with the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. "Scientifically" they are both, no doubt, the products of a barbaric "culture"; but the inability to feel their moral incommensurability is in itself a sufficient critical disqualification for speaking of them at all. To the scholar, to the student, even to the critic himself, an acquaintance with these imperfect expressions of the human spirit is valuable, it must be confessed, after a fashion—as valuable as a familiarity with the history of his institutions to the statesman. But in the same manner that the one sort of knowledge is not statesmanship, so the other is not criticism. The critic should be thankful for every scrap of information, no matter how scanty or hardly gained, toward a better understanding of things as they are, of which not the least useful is that which informs him how they came to be so; but the means must not be mistaken for the end—a grasp of the facts for a comprehension of ideas. It is all very well to know the recipe of the pudding; but if we are to avoid mental bewilderment—and that is perhaps as much as we can expect to do in a world where truth is largely a matter of convention—we must remember that its enjoyment is quite another thing and requires for its expression an entirely different set of terms.

On the other hand, just as it is necessary to guard against mistaking philological or historical, for literary, inquiry; so too it is equally necessary, in the interests of intellectual clearness, to beware of a like confusion between criticism and some ingenious analogy or illustration of the "natural" sciences. That the course of literary development furnishes a suggestive example of the principles of organic evolution, is undeniable. But undeniably too, though so serious a mind as Brunetière has failed to see it, the illustration is biological, not critical. And in like manner as Brunetière delights to recognise in literature the

familiar phenomena of the differentiation and modification of *genres*, the growth and transformation and degeneration of species, we may too, if we please, exercise our ingenuity in trying to show how Dickens's novels grew out of the work which preceded him and how they mingle the romance of Fielding with the sentimentality and realism of Richardson. But after all that is not what we read Dickens for—if, indeed, amid the constant solicitations of modern scholarship we have sufficient literary virtue left to read him at all. Or again, we may amuse ourselves in thinking to surprise the origin of the English novel as a whole in a kind of cross, such as Brunetière has so much to say about, between the comedy of manners and the social essay, such as Addison wrote, cleverly deducing from the former its turn for modern detail and from the latter its moral seriousness. But to say nothing of the fact that such transitions or transformations are in themselves quite unintelligible and explain nothing, this sort of thing yields no just sense of the tragic import of a *Clarissa Harlowe.*

And the case is no better with the "psychological" interpretation of literature than with the "physiological." To be sure, a work of genius is, in a manner, a psychological product as, in another, it is a physiological one. But while such a scientific study of genius, as it is pleasantly called, may throw a good deal of light upon the processes of composition and may even establish a kind of extrinsic mechanical order among the phenomena of literature, it fails dismally to express its essence or spirit; and leaving such a residuum, it can not be properly reckoned as criticism. For though literature is to some extent a physical and psychological product, it is to a much greater extent a moral one, of which in the exact sense of words there is no science possible. It is an affair of principle, not of law. What are known nowadays, ridiculously enough, as the moral sciences have to do, as far as they are capable of exact formulation, not with the moral order proper, but only with certain physical manifestations or accompaniments of the moral nature. In other respects they are purely descriptive and hence essentially literary in character. How much of the effect of Professor James's *Psychology*, for instance, depends upon the dexterity of his phrasing! And how much of the contents of any modern psychology consists of ordinary commonplaces done over into a kind of special jargon or cant—a sort of perverted rhetorical exercise, a misty intellectual algebra!

For this reason it fares little better with the sociological criticism represented by Hennequin and in a modified and milder dose by Leslie Stephen. To Hennequin's mind and to some less extent to Leslie Stephen's also, literature is merely a form or mode of social expression, in which society, working through the individual author, records its own psychology at a particular moment or period of its history, so that criticism becomes a kind of *Volkspsychologie*, as the Germans call it, and the author himself a mere transmitter or mouthpiece. In measure, of course, the contention is correct. In some manner a book is undoubtedly the outcome of a certain society and may be explained to some degree in function of the society contemporaneous with it. Such was Taine's idea, which, narrow and inelastic as it was, was at least more liberal than the dogmas of most of his successors. At best, however, society is but the condition, and, like all conditions, does not originate but influences. To say nothing of the merely empirical objection that it is often the author who is, in all seeming, the first to divine and rescue truth and is frequently obliged to impose himself upon his audience if he would be heard at all, so that he appears rather to form his public than to be formed by it—it is evident, in addition, that a work of literature in the strict sense of the word is something exceptional by its very nature. It is the difference—or as we still say, rather condescendingly, the genius—which gives the book its value. It is not the newspapers which constitute the literature of a period. Mere unison, what everybody is saying, as well as imitation, reproduction, repetition, fail to count. "There is nothing in the drama of Rotrou," says Brunetière, "which is not to be found in that of Corneille; if the work of the former did not exist, there would be nothing lacking to the history of our theatre . . . and that is why his tragi-comedies may interest a few of the curious, but have not a place in the history of French literature." Only the contribution, the distinctively personal vision, is of any permanent importance—and it is the work of permanent importance alone which is properly literature, since literature is obviously literature by virtue of its message to us who read it and not by virtue of its expression of local and temporal peculiarities. Pope is still poetry, not because he voices the ideals of Anne—it is just in as far as he follows the fashion of his day that he has been repudiated—but because he voices certain ideas that humanity would not willingly forego:

"And sure, if aught below the seats divine
Can touch immortals, 'tis a soul like thine,
A soul supreme in each hard instance tried
Above all pain, all anger, and all pride,
The rage of power, the blast of public breath,
The lust of lucre, and the dread of death."

It is sentiments like these, the sense of human dignity, that still constitute Pope a poet, not the *Dunciad;* while, on the other hand, Addison, the image of his time, is only less of a classic by that very fact.

Of this theory Paul Albert, himself one of its more unsystematic advocates, has such an amusingly inadvertent refutation that I can not refrain from quoting it. "Before all," he says of criticism, "the first thing to seek in a work is what makes its life, what is the soul of it. But how to discover this without replacing the work in the *milieu* where it was produced, without reconstructing the religious, social, and political life of the people who saw it born? It is because the work was in intimate harmony with the society for which it was made that it is thought beautiful." Very well. But in another moment, when brought face to face with the reality, how easily and unconsciously he relinquishes a contention untenable in fact! *A propos* of Molière he declares that "genuine art is a happy mixture of the particular and the general, of the real and the ideal. By many traits of detail Harpagon and Tartufe properly belong to the seventeenth century; the total of their physiognomy consists, however, of types of all times and all countries." Precisely so. That is the distinction to which the "sociologist" himself is finally driven between great literature and small—its relative persistency. It is still literature by its appeal for us who read it, not by its appeal for those who read it in the past. Indisputably Sophocles is an Athenian as Shakespeare is an Elizabethan; and their plays are full of local and temporal allusions and insinuations that we nowadays find it difficult or even impossible to understand or detect—for it is extremely doubtful whether we ever see in the past, with all the assistance that scholarship can give, just what was seen by its contemporaries; so that if Sophocles and Shakespeare were nothing more than Athenian and Elizabethan, they would not be literature. While on the other hand it is more than probable that we have come to admire them for many a quality which their own generation and indeed they themselves never

suspected. For it is only as they yield a meaning or significance for posterity, as they assist their successors to a better comprehension of life, that they continue to be literature. They are literature only as they are explicable, not in terms of some other subject or interest, but immediately and for themselves, and as they have succeeded in surviving the society in which they arose, while their literary characteristics are those which remain when the peculiarities of such a society are abstracted. Even Taine himself is compelled in the end to grade the arts in accordance with the duration of the fashions which they commemorate. In a word, literature is literature by virtue of some exceptional and permanent significance; any discussion which fails to bring out this appeal or which, instead of bringing it out, substitutes other concerns, such as philology or evolution or psychology or sociology, is irrelevant from the point of view of criticism. I do not say that such a discussion may not be fruitful—that it may not assist us in understanding Sophocles's significance or Shakespeare's; but the main thing critically is that significance, and whatever is not concerned immediately with that significance, is not criticism.

In a sort, no doubt, the biographical criticism, so much affected by Sainte-Beuve, is in much the same case. To be sure, a study of the author's life comes nearer to the springs of his inspiration than does any of the other studies that I have mentioned. But all the same the impertinence, though more subtle, is still impertinence. In any case what gives the writer his sole interest for criticism is his book. If he happens to be more remarkable as a character, he belongs on that side to history, not literature. Otherwise, the light by which he shines is reflected and has its source in his writing, where it may best be sought, not in his life. I am tempted even to say that a book which requires a knowledge of its maker for its enjoyment is necessarily of an inferior order. It is no particular recommendation that so much of Swift's work begins and ends with Swift. Even Goethe himself is open, in many instances, to the same reproach; to some extent he has allowed himself to become subdued to the tyranny of his own being. But then Goethe is by all odds a more significant figure as a human being than as an artist. An intimate acquaintance with the personal peculiarities and doings of authors is recognised, and correctly so, as the property of the special student rather than of the general or cultivated reader.

There is felt to be something technical and professional about it. To think otherwise is to confound literature with life. The hero, the statesman—and the poet too, it may be—belong in part to the world, whose recorder and critic is the historian; the poem alone belongs to literature. And while it is well that the literary critic, zealous of every side-light, should know his man too, yet his task is largely a special one and requires an amount of scaffolding quite incommensurate with the size of his edifice when finished. And so it is—to put a term to my enormity at once—that in reading Sainte-Beuve I am filled with impatience at the frequent obtrusion of the writer's private preoccupations and the constant exhibition of the critic's workshop.

At the same time I would not go to the other extreme, as many do, and because literature can not be wholly contained by an exact terminology, protest that criticism is nothing more than an account of the manner in which a book happens to strike us individually. In this view—the view of Anatole France and Walter Pater—the taste for literature is entirely an affair of personal liking; criticism is altogether capricious, illogical, and unreasonable—a story of adventure in a library. The only thing that can be said with certainty about a piece of writing is that we do or do not care for it. But not only is this impressionism as erroneous as any of the other conceptions of which I have spoken, it is, if anything, more vicious because it is more licentious and unprincipled. For even though literature is not amenable to scientific formulation, it does not follow by any means that criticism is wanton and unscrupulous. Life, for instance, eludes as a whole the symmetrical categories of science for the reason that it belongs in large part to another order—to the moral, not to the physical, order with which science deals. And yet the irreducible discriminations of the individual consciousness are subject after a fashion to principle though not to law—so much so that there is nothing more contemptuous than to call a man unprincipled. At all events, though our actions may be unprognosticable, we are able at least to give them some kind of consistency, to justify or excuse them on general considerations after the fact. But our impression of a book is, after all, only a portion of our mental life, as the book itself is of its author's, and is naturally constituted in the same manner as the rest of the experience to which it belongs. While literature, further, is a representation or more broadly a treatment of life

as a whole and consists of the various conceptions or visions or interpretations, not of the life of a particular time or age exclusively, but of the life of humanity at large, including not merely its active or objective life—its manners, customs, and usages—but also its inner or conscious life—its thought, emotion, and reflection; and its author's merit is measured by the value which his view of these matters has for the race. Is his view of life conformable with moral experience, is it elevated and sustaining, does it help to free us from the tyranny of appearance and of the phenomenal, does it aid us to bear misfortune and prosperity, injustice and flattery, does it strengthen and confirm our spirit and save us from ourselves; then it is good literature and a permanent contribution to human culture. For however it may be with the physical world with which science undertakes to deal—whether its order be inherent or imputed; it has been necessary at all events for man to organize for himself the moral world, the world in which he lives the most. The knowledge of himself and of his proper aim and activity, the distinction between the human and the brute, the sense of a social nature, of principle and duty, of right and wrong, even the feeling for seemliness and beauty—all these acquirements have been the result of a long and uncertain development, the contribution of many hands. To be sure, there is confusion enough as it is. But these acquisitions of the human spirit, these partial dispersals of chaos, have been confirmed and perpetuated by literature, which, even if it has not created the moral illusion, has given it form and currency.

It is for this reason that any serious discussion of literature should have to do, first of all, with the conception of life included in the work—not with life alone, for literature is not life itself but its reflection in a consciousness essentially moral; and not the book alone, for the book is merely the record of a reflection—but with the relation between the two, or, in other words, with the attitude of literature to life. Should this relation be broad and general, as in the case of an entire national literature like the Greek, or, rather more restrictedly, of some large literary movement like German romanticism; then the criticism will be broad and general too and will aim to show the manner in which this national literature as a whole or this literary movement as a whole has confronted the problem of existence. Or the relation may be narrow and particular or even individual, as in the case of a single author like Shakespeare; and under these circum-

stances the criticism, adapting itself to the subject, will become individual too and will have to show what Shakespeare answered to the most pressing questions which life proposes. Naturally such a criticism will not expect of literature a replica or pastiche of actuality. It will look rather for the harmonious adjustments of the human spirit, the establishment of a rhythmic conscious order among the promiscuous elements of experience. And in so doing it will have no hesitation in calling in assistance from any department of investigation that is likely to throw a light upon the matter—whether physiological, psychological, sociological, or what not; though it will try to avoid mistaking such answers as it may get from these sources for answers to its principal inquiry. And inasmuch as the life which is both the subject and object of literature, is neither scientific nor yet unprincipled but broadly moral; our criticism will be neither scientific nor impressionistic, but will consist in a free play of the intelligence just as life does. It will be based on general principles, which, though elastic, are broader than the observation of a single case, and which are capable of being explained and justified, as our conduct is, rationally and intelligibly, if nothing more.

Now if these considerations are just, though only in a limited and partial measure, it would seem to be high time that criticism were busying itself with the foundations of such a study—or were at least establishing certain common grounds or postulates to which its conclusions might be referred with the effect of ending all critical divergencies or at least of justifying their existence. In comparison with the age and the pretensions of the subject is it not astounding that there is yet so little substantial agreement with regard to the significance and rationale of the simplest literary phenomena? To all appearance it is still impossible for any two critics to agree as to the proper relation in general of literature to life, as it is to appeal to any accepted canon by way of settling their disputes. One opinion proceeds on the assumption that literature and life are or should be identical; another, that they are diverse, though without venturing to define the difference. Of the former party, one assumes that it is the closeness of the imitation that makes literature; another, that it is the technical skill, the trick of style, the verbal coquetry of the rendering. Of a stanza of Browning's *Lovers' Quarrel*, which retails the heroine's costume, Mr. Chesterton observes that it "would almost serve as an order to a dress-

maker and is therefore poetry," while a reviewer cites the remark as an amusing illustration of Mr. Chesterton's ignorance of the very nature of poetry. But Mr. Chesterton is either right or wrong. If he is wrong, there should be some way of bringing him to terms. If he is right, there should be some way of silencing his detractors. It is scandalous that at this time of day a man may make any statement about the rudiments of literature without fear of shame or ridicule. Is there another subject of consequence in which such recklessness would be tolerated, much more applauded as though it were an admired qualification in an authority?

And yet this is a problem which lies at the very roots of criticism; for how is it possible to determine the merits or even the character of a piece of work while the aim and intention of its existence are uncertain? How can we form an opinion about a literary product before we know what literature in general ought to do—or at all events what it actually has done? Nor is the problem insoluble, much as the factiousness of modern criticism may have embroiled it. At least there ought to be comparatively little difficulty in stating it fairly, even though it may not be possible all at once to reconcile individual prejudices or preferences for one literary position rather than another. Community of opinion in all such matters is, like every work of construction, an affair of slow and laborious cultivation. Right reason gradually prevails; a canon finally develops. But it must be preceded by copious discussion, by a clear recognition and exhibition from every side of all the facts in their proper character.

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