

THE TYPICAL FORMS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE FOR COLLEGE CLASSES

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PREFACE

THIS book, derived from several years of experience with college classes, is intended primarily to be used with the now popular introductory courses in literature that approach their subject by way of representative types or literary forms. It undertakes to provide for a number of these typical forms a somewhat extended account of their development as phases of art, a briefer statement of their accepted standards of technique, a suggestive list of topics for study, and a bibliography of collections and critical discussions. It is not intended to supplant the reading and interpretation of literary documents, but rather to supply a basis of understanding and conviction, upon which such interpretations can be made more intelligently. Hitherto such material has been brought to the attention of students by means of lectures, or through assigned readings in various books of reference. But freshmen and sophomores in college are not skilled in note-taking, and the reference reading they do is often poorly digested. It should be an immense advantage to have in their hands a readable syllabus of this fundamental information.

Just how the book may be employed most effectively must be determined by individual instructors. Some will omit certain types and chapters, as the time allotted to the course may require. The author himself presents the drama in a separate course. The various divisions of the book are planned to suggest class-room discussion, where that is preferred, or may be assigned as private reading and tested largely by the student's ability to apply theory

to the specimens of literature under consideration in class. In any event the first-hand acquaintance with the literature is all-important. Collections or anthologies of the various types have been described at some length in the bibliographies. The examples they contain should be analyzed and compared according to schemes easily derived from the sections on technique in this book. For the shorter forms actual attempts at developing the student's own imaginative impulses into finished products will clarify his mind surprisingly. The subjects for reports should serve the several purposes of enlarging the student's knowledge, of giving him practice in organizing and expressing information, and of further illustrating the substance of the course by more extended comparisons.

It will be a matter for regret if the usefulness of this book is limited to classes and class rooms. The entire treatment rests upon the assumption that the students who use it are already readers of reasonably good literature and will continue to be so throughout their lives. Its aim is to enable them to approach all their reading with more intelligent judgment, and keener, richer appreciation. Literature is presented as a vital thing, inspired by very real and immediate impulses, and responding readily to the increased demands made upon it by the complex experiences of today, or the still more complicated ones of tomorrow. The book is submitted even to the reading public outside college halls, many of whom find it difficult at times to give a reason for such literary taste and discrimination as they practice.

Obviously a book of this sort is full of obligations. Certain larger features of indebtedness are indicated in the text or in footnotes. Numerous others are implied in the lists of critical discussions appended to each chap-

ter. Two special instances, of a more personal sort, are gratefully acknowledged here. One is the genuine patience and apparent interest of three successive college classes, who permitted this material to be tested upon them until it took final shape. The other is the constructive advice and friendly coöperation of the General Editor of this American series of Oxford publications, whose experience and judgment have contributed largely to make the book what it is.

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I

FORMATION OF TYPES

LITERATURE finds its place in the studies of youth and the affections of men and women by virtue of the fact that it is one of the fine arts. It ministers to none of men's material needs, does not increase their physical comfort, and is not valued primarily for the lessons it teaches or the information it conveys. Furthermore, its enjoyment is limited to no individual or group of the elect, but is open to all who can understand and appreciate. Such qualities as these distinguish the fine arts in general from the practical arts, the crafts whose product has material utility.

The expression "fine arts" is comparatively modern. Aristotle thought of them as "arts of imitation"; the French still call them *beaux arts*—that is, the "beautiful arts." Both these terms are more significant than our own somewhat negative one. For these arts find justification in the pleasure they impart by means of beauty, and this beauty depends upon the perfect portrayal or imitation of the artist's imaginative impression of some phase of life. It is not enough that art in any form should merely reflect people and things as they pass. The waxen policeman we almost speak to in a museum is no more a work of art than the clever imitation of a bumblebee performed on a violin. The personality, the impression, the mood of the artist,—this

human element must intervene between life and its imitation in order that we may have art.

The enumeration of the fine arts involves some difficulty. To the Greeks they were music, poetry, dancing, painting, and sculpture. Architecture was classed with the practical arts, being regarded as in no sense imitative except for its ornamentation, which

The Fine Arts

belonged in the province of sculpture. Even today we feel that there is more of practical utility about architecture than belongs to any of these others. Dancing was for a long time omitted from the list, and has but recently been restored, largely under European influence. Various other arts are still more debatable. Acting, for example, is certainly imitation intended to give pleasure, but it is too often slavish copying. Tapestry-work properly done may involve equal skill and charm with painting. Pottery, one of the most primitive of arts, has once more come into favor. The arts of the goldsmith and of the landscape-gardener have been in high regard ever since the Italian Renaissance.

The position of poetry among the fine arts has never been questioned. The sonnet, the tragedy, or the lover's serenade obviously presents not life but

Literature— the poet's impression of some large or
The Intellectual Side small cross-section of experience, unified and revitalized by his creative imagination into a thing of beauty. Time

cannot affect this condition of things, but it has brought certain important modifications. For one thing we must now understand the word "poetry" to include all imaginative literature, for the boundary line between prose and verse has always been defined but vaguely, and various forms of literary prose have developed in modern

times. This very development has emphasized the fact that literature, unlike the other arts, usually carries with it a burden of thought, a message for the intellect as well as an appeal to emotion and fancy. Men feel the need of this intellectual content to give weight and dignity to literature, but they no longer accept the doctrine that poetry is made pleasurable in order to sweeten some bitter moral pill.

Literature or poetry, under present conditions, has peculiar difficulties in reaching us. Painting, sculpture, architecture, the dance, are there before
The Medium us in their complete beauty, and we have
of Letters only to open our eyes to see and enjoy.

Music we do not regard as music until it is performed, and then our pleasure is immediate. All of these are for all people, without distinction of race or language. Once men depended for their poetry on the minstrel's song or the rhythmic chant of the storyteller, and literature and music were closest of kin. Now we sit in silence over a book of printed characters, and imagine the sound of ringing words and well-turned phrases into which these characters may be translated. It is as if we were all musicians so trained that we could hear the harmonies by reading printed notes,—and each nation had its particular system of notation. There is, however, one compensation. There has been only one Mona Lisa, only one Cathedral of Rheims. Before the development of the phonograph many people had little or no opportunity to hear good music. But good books are plentiful and cheap, and he must be poor and ignorant indeed who cannot re-create for himself the fancies of Shakespeare or the fiery message of the Hebrew prophets.

As already intimated, poetry was no sooner devised as a form of artistic expression, than it began de-

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veloping,—making various adaptations to meet various conditions of performance. Some of these adaptations

were so wide in their appeal that they

Differentiation promptly became more or less permanent and conventionalized; some disappeared with certain temporary conditions

Poetry

that had given them birth; still others

were developed farther until eventually they made a place for themselves. Thus there have arisen certain types or typical forms of literature, *genres* as the French call them, by a process not unlike that of evolution in plants and animals.¹ Often in the course of this evolution critics have undertaken to classify these types or divisions of poetry, with results that could not hope to be final. Aristotle, and the Italian critics after him, based his division on the method of presentation—in action, narrative, or song—and the class of people whose life was portrayed. Thus tragedy was the drama of gods and heroes, comedy that of the common people; while the narrative forms were divided into epic poems and satirical lampoons. Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes left lyric or song poetry entirely out of consideration; it appeared to them remote from life and concerned chiefly with rhetorical display. Bacon adds instead “allegorical poetry,” while Hobbes subdivides his dramatic and narrative types into three classes, thus: poetry of the court, tragedy or epic; poetry of the city, comedy or satire; poetry of the country, pastoral comedy or eclogue.

Since the literature of any particular people has been so distinctly an evolution of types, it will be clearer and probably more accurate to approach the divisions of English literature from this historical point of view. Our

¹ Cf. Chapter I of Ferdinand Brunetière's *L'Évolution des Genres*, Paris, 1890.

earliest popular literature may be supposed to have taken the form of ballads, crude songs based on local experiences, composed impromptu, and chanted to the accompaniment of dance-movements. Thus there were present from the beginning the three essential elements of narrative, song, and action—the last no doubt often imitative in character. Indeed the ballad, though it has survived to our own day, promptly separated into lyric ballad and narrative ballad, both retaining considerable dramatic force.

For a long time this dramatic instinct for imitation through action could express itself only in ballads, or in pantomime and equally rude farce. Then it was appropriated to the uses of the church, and employed in performing sections of bible story (the miracle plays) or versions of the world-old conflict of vice and virtue (the moralities). The facility learned in dramatizing episodes from the bible was soon applied to secular history. Then the connected experiences of heroes, in history or legend, were organized with a greater sense of form, with classical drama as a model, and English tragedy appeared. Comedy developed in a similar way by putting motive and character into the old farces and by acquiring mastery of technique from Latin models.

Among the early ballads, which were largely narrative, occasional ones appeared that were concerned with emotion, supposedly the personal feeling of the author. Soon these developed into a class by themselves, and the expression of human emotion in song became so popular by the days of Queen Elizabeth that England was “a nest of singing birds.” With the growth of national

feeling in this period came the patriotic, or national song, which a little later found its highest expression in the ode. The personal lyric in the meantime was becoming constantly more subjective and introspective, and so involved in thought and phrasing that it did not lend itself to the music of a song. It remained true to its original limit of a single unit of emotion, and appeared in any one of several verse forms already in common use. Closely akin to the lyric poem, indeed in its most attractive form a kind of prose lyric, is the personal essay, which grew up in England coincident with the decline of Elizabethan lyric and the rise of prose to a position of literary importance. It remained for the next lyric period in English literature, the romantic activity of the early nineteenth century, to reveal the higher possibilities of the essay to express private feeling and imagination.

From the narrative element in the primitive ballads a somewhat more complicated family-line has descended.

Narrative From the beginning, no doubt, such ex-
Types periences or adventures were selected
for telling as had "point" to them,—
some central fact that established them as

units of narrative and set them apart from other happenings. Often this was a matter of intrigue and deception, with satisfaction to be had from seeing an easy victim fleeced or a scheming rascal checkmated. Thus developed the broad, popular verse-narrative called the "*fabliau*," a favorite with the late Middle Ages, and best known to us in certain tales of Chaucer. Gradually this passed from verse to prose, and took the name of "*novella*" in Italy and Spain and "novel" in England, though it was really just a short story, as such things were understood in and about the year 1700. The modern short story had its birth less than a hundred years ago

from a union of some of these old-fashioned well-told tales with the new imaginative and emotional spirit found in romantic literature.

The narrative ballads, throughout their history, displayed a certain interesting tendency. They were much inclined to unite with others dealing with the same or a similar personage into larger units or cycles. In case this personage was sufficiently heroic, the ultimate result was a form of popular or folk epic. This is seen at its best in the Old English poem, *Beowulf*, and is approximated in the *Little Gest of Robin Hood*. In classical literature the logical progress was from this amalgamated popular epic—as seen in the Homeric poems—to a unified, self-conscious imitative product like Virgil's *Æneid*. Later still the elements of love and adventure in the epics were developed independently into long romances, first in prose, later in verse, and finally in prose again. England, however, took little or no part in these developments. England produced no imitations of *Beowulf*, and the cycle of Arthurian romance, for which she furnished the material, was developed chiefly on foreign soil.

Both literary epic and prose romance came into England as a part of her Renaissance awakening. Only two great specimens of the former stand to her credit, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, representing the tradition of Virgil, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, of the type of the romantic epics invented by Italy. Prose romances were not widely cultivated, translations from the French being more popular, and soon gave way to the growing power of realism that trimmed the romances of their extravagances and brought them down to earth as

eighteenth-century novels. The novel has maintained its popularity for two centuries, varying between the two extremes of photographic realism and romantic fancy.

The literary forms enumerated are by no means the only ones produced and cultivated in the long evolution of literature in English. One might add

Minor Types a considerable list of types very much in the fashion at one time or another, or still enjoying an unbroken, if somewhat modest, popularity. Fable and epigram, memoir and familiar letter, literary biography and didactic poem, all have their place in the history of literature. In the limited space of a book like this, however, attention must be centered upon such literature as has established itself permanently in the affections of the race, the large and genuinely "typical" forms in which men's moods and fancies are accustomed to find expression.

This method of approach to English literature is open to criticism of various sorts. We are assured that creative

artists do not think in terms of types; **Writers Are** that these are artificial classes with artificial distinctions, set up by critics who **Conscious of** follow in the wake of creation and **Types** classify the product of this creation as a

pretense of explaining it. But this is true only in part. It is not a high type of creative mind that undertakes to produce a masterpiece according to a programme or code of technique. The great craftsman in letters probably cannot define in advance the exact design his imagination will take when the mood is on him. But he knows whether he is at work on a lyric poem or a short story, a play or a novel. Furthermore, he knows the finer technical points regarding the construction of this form, and consciously or unconsciously shapes his product to

conform to them. The poet needs a fine frenzy, an "esemplastic" imagination—as Coleridge would say—that enables him to see the end of his task in the beginning. Investigation usually shows that the best of poets have given no little time and energy to the problem of effectiveness in selecting, massing, and phrasing details.

A more valid objection lies in the fact that there is a constant tendency to blend and confuse the so-called typical forms of literature, just as there is to confuse certain of the fine arts, and that many of our most worthy documents of literature are products of such fusion and defy classification. Only critics who are most severely classical array themselves against such methods, while minds of a highly romantic turn take particular delight in them. It is merely the old problem of the comic scenes in tragedy brought down to date, and Shakespeare is emphatically on the side of the romantics. Probably if alive today he would approve freely of plays that sacrifice structure and action to cleverly phrased "ideas," or of essays that are short stories with an intellectual point to them.

It is by no means the purpose of this book to oppose such procedure. But it is clear enough that literary expression, in a series of centuries, has evolved these various forms, each with its particular selection of technical elements arranged in particular relations to each other, and that these forms represent the natural gamut of utterance from which the literary artist may choose. To object that a particular piece "falls between two stools" and is part lyric, part dramatic, may be as absurd as to complain of the sharps and flats in music. It is at least desirable, though, that the student or the

The Fusion of Types

Knowledge of Types Fundamental

"gentle reader" should be able with assurance to pronounce a piece "part lyric, part dramatic," and to know what he is talking about when he does so. These typical forms are not likely to be overthrown by romantic fusions any more than music, scene painting, and poetry have lost their identity and general interest since they have been successfully blended into opera.

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