

*The
Modern
Study
of
Literature*

Moulton



THE MODERN STUDY OF LITERATURE

AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY THEORY
AND INTERPRETATION

By

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TO

JOSEPH JACOBS

UNIVERSITY CHUM OF MY EARLIER YEARS AND
LITERARY COMRADE IN MY WORKING LIFE

THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED

IN ADMIRATION OF HIS VERSATILE SCHOLARSHIP AND
LITERARY BRIGHTNESS, AND IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT
OF MUCH HELP DERIVED FROM HIS COUNSELS

PREFACE

To write a book, it seems to me, is sometimes a less difficult task than to hit upon the right title by which the book may be announced. The difficulty is aggravated by the author's consciousness that out of the unlimited number of readers who, conceivably, might be interested in the book, the vast majority will never get any farther than the title. In the present case, what I most desire my book to accomplish is that which is expressed by the sub-title—I desire it to be an introduction to literary theory and interpretation. But if I think so to announce it, I am met by the reflection that in the present generation of readers only a very small number—quite a negligible quantity—have any interest whatever in literary theory, nor do they think of literature in general as a thing to which interpretation applies. There is perhaps more of appeal in the suggestion of a wide disparity between the traditional study of literature and the high standard set by other modern studies. But if I elect to lay emphasis upon this, I am in danger of giving to what I say a polemic color, which is the last thing I should desire. And if—as I have done—I seek to unite the two suggestions, I forego at once the brevity which is the soul of more things than wit; and I place myself in the predicament of those who try to sit upon two stools, with a disconcerting prospect of falling between them.

For a period now of over forty years my life has been wholly occupied with the teaching of literature; partly in university classes, partly in the attractive sphere of university extension, where one encounters students who are both receptive and mature. It has always been my ambition to make some contribution toward the shaping of this study of literature, which by tradition is so miscellaneous and unorganized. Previous works of mine have been preliminary studies; discussion of

particular principles in application to special literary fields. The most obvious defect of the study is the absence of any instinct for inductive observation, such as must be the basis for criticism of any other kind. My first book was an attempt to illustrate such scientific criticism in the most delightful of all literary provinces, the plays of Shakespeare. This *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* was, at a later period, supplemented by *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Thinker*, which discussed the philosophy of life underlying the dramatic stories, and illustrated the general principle that fiction is the experimental side of human philosophy. Again: the traditional study, while rightly recognizing the Greek and Latin classics as a foundation for literary culture, has in practice sacrificed the literary for the linguistic element in these classics. My second book sought to introduce *The Ancient Classical Drama* to the English reader, and to use this as a study of literary evolution. But there is another defect in our traditional study of literature which is appalling in its gravity—the omission of the Bible. It is not only the spiritual loss to academic education; the literary forms of the Hebrew classics, rich in themselves, and the natural corrective to the purely Greek criticism founded by Aristotle, have been entirely effaced under the mediaeval arrangement of the Bible in chapters and verses which is still retained in current versions. My third work was on *The Literary Study of the Bible: An Account of the Literary Forms Represented in the Sacred Writings*; and, following this, twelve years of my life were occupied with editing *The Modern Reader's Bible*, and the investigation of literary structure which this involved. My last work was an attempt to grasp the whole field of literature, not as an aggregation of particular literatures, but in the conception of *World Literature* as seen in perspective from the English point of view. In succession to these separate studies the present book seeks to arrive at a synthetic view of the theory and interpretation of literature.

I have gone into these details in order to make clear the design and use of the book which follows. An eminent teacher of literature was accustomed to impress upon his students that "a general principle is as gas in the mouth of him that knows not the particulars." This touches what is the perpetual problem for the art of exposition—the question exactly how far to go in discussion of individual literary works, which have an interest of their own, in offering these as elucidation of literary theory. It would be possible to write a work which would be wholly theoretic; but this would not only make a dull book, it would further be a sin against the foundation principle that our first duty to literature is to love it. On the other hand, if in so large a field one surrenders freely to disquisition on literary masterpieces, the connected thread of philosophical theory is lost in the particulars. For philosophy is only a fine word for seeing things in their true perspective. The natural solution seems to be the plan here adopted: a single work devoted to literary theory, discussion of particular works being reduced to what is essential, supplemented by other works in which special portions of literature are followed out in detail. In the footnotes to this book I make references to other works of mine by which study of particular points can be carried farther. Very occasionally I have incorporated in this work tabular or other matter from my other books; for, while it may seem questionable taste for an author to quote from himself, yet it seems a pity to seek out a second best illustration when a better is available.

It is natural to ask, for what readers this book is intended. The choice is usually between academic circles and the general reader. But in the case of literature I doubt if this distinction applies. The machinery of scholastic teaching seems favorable to method and thoroughness, but this is counterbalanced by the academic bias toward specialization; the general reader retains his breadth of view, and, while voluntary study is under

temptation to be discursive, it is open to each individual to correct this by self-direction. Our universities seem to be tending more and more to become professional schools. On the other hand, there are many signs of the times which are favorable to general culture. It is an age of Public Libraries: and every library is a university *in posse*. The enterprise of leading publishers is doing excellent service in making the whole world's literature accessible; and it is a special note of the present time that the highest scholarship will devote itself to transplanting literary masterpieces from one language to another in translations which are themselves literature. In writing this book I have steadily kept before me the purpose of making it serviceable in university and school classrooms. I have also tried to make it interesting to the general reader. And the readers I should most wish to serve are those who have recognized their college graduation, not as the goal, but the starting-point of a culture with which the leisure time of their whole lives may be filled.

RICHARD GREEN MOULTON

July, 1915

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION: DOMINANT IDEAS OF MODERN STUDY: UNITY, INDUCTION, EVOLUTION	I
BOOK I: LITERARY MORPHOLOGY: VARIETIES OF LITERATURE AND THEIR UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES	9
CHAPTER	
I. The Elements of Literary Form	11
II. The Fusion of Literary Elements	42
III. Literary Form the Key to Literary Interpretation	64
BOOK II: THE FIELD AND SCOPE OF LITERARY STUDY	75
CHAPTER	
IV. The Unity of the Literary Field and the Concep- tion of World Literature	77
V. The Outer and the Inner Study of Literature	93
BOOK III: LITERARY EVOLUTION AS REFLECTED IN THE HIS- TORY OF WORLD LITERATURE	117
CHAPTER	
VI. The Differentiation of Poetry and Prose	119
VII. Evolution in Epic Poetry	132
VIII. Evolution in Drama	162
IX. Evolution in Lyric Poetry	197
BOOK IV: LITERARY CRITICISM: THE TRADITIONAL CONFU- SION AND THE MODERN RECONSTRUCTION	219
CHAPTER	
X. Types of Literary Criticism and Their Traditional Confusion	221
XI. Speculative Criticism.—The Fundamental Con- ception and Function of Poetry	230
XII. Speculative Criticism.—The Evolutionary Theory of Taste	256

CHAPTER	
XIII.	Inductive Criticism: or the Criticism of Interpretation 270
XIV.	The History of Critical Opinion 303
XV.	Judicial Criticism: or Criticism in Restraint of Production 317
XVI.	Subjective Criticism: or Criticism Accepted as Literature 325
XVII.	The Place of Criticism in the Study of Literature 329
BOOK V: LITERATURE AS A MODE OF PHILOSOPHY 333	
CHAPTER	
XVIII.	Story as a Mode of Thinking 335
XIX.	Literature as the Criticism of Life 356
XX.	Literature as a Higher Interpretation of Life and Nature 364
XXI.	The Subject-Matter of Literature as Important as Literary Art 370
BOOK VI: LITERATURE AS A MODE OF ART 375	
CHAPTER	
XXII.	The Grammar of Literary Art 377
XXIII.	Plot as Poetic Architecture and Artistic Providence 380
XXIV.	Poetic Ornament: Theory of Imagery and Symbolism 403
XXV.	Literary Echoing: The Conception of Literature as a Second Nature 445
XXVI.	Language as a Factor in Literary Art 456
CONCLUSION: THE TRADITIONAL AND THE MODERN STUDY OF LITERATURE 487	
SYLLABUS 495	
WORKS OF THE AUTHOR 510	
GENERAL INDEX 511	

INTRODUCTION
DOMINANT IDEAS OF MODERN STUDY

INTRODUCTION

DOMINANT IDEAS OF MODERN STUDY

The purpose of this work is to discuss the study of literature: what it must become, if it is to maintain its place in the foremost rank of modern studies. Some measure of review is necessary of what by tradition the study of literature is at present: the spirit of this work, however, is expository, not polemic. Such discussion involves the whole theory or philosophy of literature, which at one time was deemed important, but which has of late years fallen strangely into neglect. As it appears to me, there are three fundamental points in which the study of literature has fallen behind the general spirit of modern thought.

The first of these is the failure to recognize the unity of all literature. The present conception of the study is a tradition dating from the Renaissance. This was a very special epoch, which may almost be looked upon as an accident of history. The rising literatures of Europe, still in an inchoate stage, had been confronted with the mature and splendid literatures of Greece and Rome, suddenly recovered in their fulness. For a generation Greece was the schoolmaster of Europe. No classics of front rank were available except in Latin and Greek; the one literature which might have rivaled these, the Bible, was potent as to its matter and spirit, but could not influence literary form on account of the mediaeval setting in which it appeared. It was a great scheme of education and culture which thus united the linguistic discipline of the dead languages with the vital masterpieces of ancient literature. *But in course of time other literatures rose to high rank, and claimed attention, though they were studied only from the classical

point of view. Other studies, distinct from that of literature, multiplied, and invaded the educational curriculum: reducing the portion of the whole that could be allotted to classical literature, reducing in the main the literary element of classical study, which begins only when the difficult languages have been mastered. The situation could be met only by specialization; and hence arose the departmental scheme of study which still obtains—the arrangement by which different students in different classrooms are engaged with Greek, Latin, Oriental, Romance, German, English literatures, studying these in connection with the respective languages, and with much else that is important but is not literature. It is clear that a study of literature so divided cannot, even under the best circumstances, rise above the provincial; for a large proportion of those who enter into it it becomes little beyond a study of language. Such breaking up of the whole field into independent departments would not be tolerated for a moment in a study of philosophy, or a study of history. Specialization of the same kind belongs to the pursuit of the natural sciences. But here the ever minuter subdivision of the field, essential for the investigator, is balanced by an ever growing sense that the Nature which is being examined from so many points of view is one and the same. There is no such catholic grasp of literature: no tendency to correlate one literature with another, modern with ancient; no instinct of perspective which seeks to view particular questions as they arise in the light of the study as a whole. Literary study remains a country without a map. Hence the unity of literature becomes the first postulate for sound literary study.

In addition to this consideration, there are two master ideas of modern thought which will be found to have only slightly affected the study of literature as it obtains at present. These are inductive observation, and evolution. As to each of these some explanation is necessary.

The attempt is sometimes made to depreciate the importance of inductive method as a characteristic of modern thought. It is claimed that modern observers do not in fact proceed on the system formulated for them by Bacon; that logical processes which are the converse of inductive have a large space in the field of modern science. But such objections seem to be beside the mark. The question is not one of logic, which is concerned with the possible modes of thinking, but with the habits of thought which, at particular times, are found to prevail. The modern observer does not think in the scheme of Bacon or Mill, just as the deductive philosopher does not think in syllogisms. Thinking, alike for the thinker and his reader, is an instinctive process, unconscious of its steps; it makes no matter how the successive steps have been reached—whether by system, or by intuition, or by happy chance—so long as they meet acceptance. The criterion comes when some step in the process is challenged: then it is that the deductive reasoner falls back upon his syllogisms, the inductive thinker verifies by observation of the matter in hand. In modern philosophy, induction does not supersede other modes of thought; but it serves as a standard to which, ultimately, they are referred. Deductive mathematics may be the most fitting mode of arriving at a system of moving bodies; but a leading use of that system when it is attained is to confront it with positive observation of actual moving bodies. Large portions of modern speculative thought will be in regions in which observation and verification are impracticable; such speculations will remain the least certain and convincing parts of philosophy; while, if they touch any point where observation becomes possible, by such verification they will stand or fall.

Now, of all studies, that of literature is the one in which there least appears this instinct of verification by observation of the subject-matter. A modern review will be effective by

reason of the literary skill with which it is presented; by the literary interest which the reading of it evokes. If the reader were to turn from the review to the work treated, in order to see how far this has been elucidated by what he has just read, no one would be more surprised than the reviewer. Discussions of literary theory proceed for the most part on trains of a priori reasoning: if particular pieces of literature do not harmonize with the reasoning, so much the worse for the literature. If we seek the principles on which the reasoning rests, often these have been constructed on the spur of the moment; or they are a mere tradition from the past; or they have the authority of a great name; or there is begging of the question by dogmatic pronouncements as to what good taste requires. A theory of *Hamlet* will be welcomed because it is new; or because it is extremely interesting; or because it falls in with some favorite ethical principle. No doubt it will be supported by quotations from the play—quotations that tell in its favor: if objection be made that the theory leaves large parts of the poem without significance, this can be met by the suggestion that Shakespeare was an irregular genius, who did not frame his play to please the critics of the future. The same Shakespeare is handled by those whose interest is philology, or textual criticism: it is instructive to contrast the care with which the philologist or textual critic will marshal his authorities, weigh evidence, show conscientious desire to account for apparent exceptions, with the broad generalizations of the purely literary critic, who is secure in his confidence that the theory will not be confronted with the poem it is advanced to explain. Thus, even at this late date, we have to plead—as if it were a novelty—that literary questions are questions to be decided upon evidence. Of course, in this as in other studies there is abundant room for a priori reasoning. But any study is open to suspicion, as long as it evades the verification of theory by appeal to the subject-matter.

The second of the important ideas is evolution. Of course, evolution is not a modern, but one of the most ancient of all conceptions. Not only the early philosophy of Plato, but the poetry which preceded philosophy, is full of evolution. Hesiodic poetry starts with the evolution of gods and universe. The Prometheus of Aeschylus is a study in evolution: the long disquisition of Prometheus on his benefits to mankind is simply the evolution of human civilization, with a startling climax in the art of divination. Not to be behindhand, Aristophanic comedy presents the Chorus of Birds singing the evolution of all things out of an embryonic 'wind-egg.' What modern thought has done is to give greater definiteness to the conception of evolution, seeing in it the differentiation by gradual process of specific varieties out of what was more general, and the reunion of species in new combinations. For our present purpose the important thing is to distinguish two mental attitudes: what may be called the static and the evolutionary attitude of mind. The static thinker is possessed by fixed ideas, or fixed standards, usually drawn from the state of things he sees around him: these he, half-unconsciously, brings to bear upon regions of thought the most remote from his own. An eighteenth-century thinker was conscious of living in a world in which individuality played a great part, yet not without some concession to social claims: with this consciousness he surveys the origin of society, and finds it in some social contract by which the individual surrenders part of his individual liberty in return for the advantages of social protection. It has not occurred to him that this individuality he was taking for granted was, historically, the ~~late~~ product, evolved slowly out of the social ideals he was trying to explain. A literary critic has been born into an age of books and original authors, to whom plagiarism is a sin. With such prepossessions he inquires whether David or some other person 'wrote' a particular psalm, whether Homer is the 'author' of the *Iliad*. It does not occur