

civilisation is suffering can only be remedied by a reversal of this process which will restore the true hierarchy of spiritual ends and recognise the autonomy and irreducibility of the higher levels of spiritual reality.

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LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

THERE are obvious difficulties about reviewing a dictionary, especially when the dictionary approaches the status of an encyclopaedia in the variety of the matters covered and the method of treating them. The most useful way in which I can deal with the *Dictionary of World Literature*⁽¹⁾ is first to indicate the general scope of the book, then to consider the various forms which the discussion of literature may take and to use examples from the book to point or illustrate my remarks.

The dictionary as a whole is not concerned with judgments on particular or collective works of literature, but with general ideas bearing on literature, literary forms and technique, ancient and modern criticism, schools and movements, and rhetorical terms. Thus Dante and Milton are not appraised as poets, but their poetical theory is resumed, and the forms they used are considered under such headings as *Epic*, *Sonnet*, *Terza rima*, *English versification*. The amount of actual information given is large and wide-ranging, and the Editor may be praised for his general planning and his marshalling of contributors.

Of the various ways in which literature may be discussed the most important is the most general—the examination of the nature and purpose of literature in the light of metaphysics and morals. This may be called the philosophy of literature, and its value evidently depends on the truth of the higher principles it appeals to and the skill with which deductions are made. False principles to begin with, or inexperience in application, may render it nugatory or harmful. It is nowadays rare to find a writer on literature whose general philosophical training is adequate for the attempt, and Mr. Shipley has been fortunate in securing a leaven of such work for his dictionary. Dr. Coomaraswamy contributes three articles which are steeped in metaphysical wisdom (*Indian drama*, *Indian literary theory*, *Symbolism*); and there are Catholic contributors who, without showing such mastery of their tradition as he does of his, have yet been well enough grounded scholastically to give their articles a solidity of background usually lacking in the

(1) *Dictionary of World Literature: Criticism, Forms, Technique*. Ed. J. T. Shipley. (Routledge; 35s.).

work of professional men of letters. (*Form*, by James Craig La Drière, and *Progress*, by Father Zema, S.J., are good instances here). There are also, of course, plenty of examples of general theory vitiated by shallow philosophy. One of them, *Intention*, has drawn from Dr. Coomaraswamy an excellent rejoinder in the *American Bookman* (Winter, 1944).

General theory deduced from higher principles can never be adequately replaced by general theory induced from particular instances. Nevertheless, the weakness and the provincialism of a merely aesthetic view of literature may, to some extent, be remedied by wider knowledge of the work of other times and places, in particular when such work itself embodies traditional principles which may move the reader to study and acceptance. And here again this dictionary does useful service. There are articles on such things as Accadian and Sumerian literature, Chinese and Japanese poetry, Arabic and Persian metric, mediaeval hymns and drama, folktales and mythology—all of which should help at least to shake the self-centredness of the typical modern critic. And in the discussion of literary forms there is often a wider use of references than has hitherto been usual; in the article on *Tragedy*, for instance, Egyptian and Syrian plays are mentioned before Greek. It is therefore somewhat surprising that the writer on *Epic Poetry* should have limited himself in the conventional way and made no mention of the two great Indian epics or the Persian *Epic of Kings* or the Georgian *Man With the Leopard Skin*.

From the philosophy of literature we descend to the practical criticism of particular works, where the chief matters to be considered are the author's purpose and its execution, and, further, the worthiness or unworthiness of the purpose. That the ratio of purpose to execution (concept to product) is the primary concern of literary criticism purely as such has been argued in detail by Dr. Coomaraswamy in the *Bookman* article already mentioned. (The position is implicit in the dictum of St. Thomas: *Artis opus non esset perfectum si artificiatio aliquid deesset eorum quae ars continet*⁽²⁾). The further question (whether the particular work should ever have been purposed at all) belongs properly to the moral critic rather than the literary critic, though the two may, of course, be united in one person and often the two kinds of judgment may profitably be made together for the benefit of the same audience.

But what is the audience? As the article on *Ancient Grammarians as Critics* reminds us, "The modern professional critic is teaching readers how to read; the ancient undertook to teach the

(2) *Supplementum*, 80, I, c.

student how to compose". The latter purpose is not entirely unrepresented in modern critical writing, but it is comparatively so unfamiliar that many find it difficult to appreciate the point of view of, for instance, Quintilian, who, instead of telling his readers how to "enjoy literature", considers all the authors he treats of as possible models for the orator. His position seems *naïve*, but though *naïveté* is not absent from Quintilian, there is more in his aim and method than is usually recognised. Such a writer has the advantage of addressing a particularly like-minded audience, and aims at showing them general principles of good writing which are analogically present in writers of different languages and in different *genres*; if the teacher can tell and the pupil grasp how a Latin orator may perfect his art by the study of Greek poets, the work done has an undeniable value and compares very favourably with the work of a modern critic in "educating the reader". The modern critic lacks a like-minded audience. At one extreme, among those who read him, are the few genuine students who will profit precisely by such guidance as his; at the other are the many readers by accident who would be better employed in learning to cook or dig; in between are some who ought to be reading something else, but for various reasons prefer to read chiefly books about books, critical or other.

For there remains a third division of writings concerned with literature—those which neither treat of general principles nor apply those principles in critical judgment of particular works, but simply give information of various kinds on literature and books and authors. Some of these are useful or necessary aids to the student's reading—for example, works of linguistic or metrical scholarship. Others indicate material which will interest readers who would not otherwise hear of it—summaries of new or newly found books, introductions to neglected work which use quotation rather than criticism. These have much the same function, modest and useful, as the legitimate sort of advertisement (say a plain trade catalogue). But from them it is no great distance to other writings which have more in common with illegitimate advertisement, revealing either the maldistribution of goods which should be accessible to all or the desire to create a want where none was felt before and none should be felt now. There are, further, the descriptions of literary groups and *coteries* and fashions—descriptions made with the irresponsibility of a gossip column. Lastly there are the explorations and exploitations of the personalities of authors past and present—in earlier days, more or less innocently anecdotal, nowadays oftener pretentiously psychological.

By this time the trees have become very dense indeed and the

wood all but invisible. No wonder the "common reader" is bewildered. Guided by a reasonable tradition, even left to his common sense, he might have discovered what it was good for him to read and have been content to master that. But too often he is a kind of Kipps, forced as it were to "rise in society", awed by his sponsors and at their mercy. He is an amateur patron who would be glad to use the work done for him, but is given to understand that he must first learn to speak the technical language of the studio—who might like to read a little poetry, but is invited first to solve the problem of Hamlet, the enigma of Keats, the mystery of Wordsworth.

As one looks again at the dictionary as a whole, one feels most of all the passage from the sacred to the profane, from the integral to the accidental. At one end, the oral literature of primitive races of which the Chadwicks write that "in Asia, in Polynesia, even in Africa, man's chief intellectual preoccupations are with *spiritual* adventure"; or the Javanese dance-drama which was "born as a ritual of worship and at all times has retained this flavour". At the other end, the phenomena of *Acmeism*, *Cubo-futurism*, *Ego-futurism*, faithfully listed here. And one reads with increased astonishment (*Newspapers and public taste*), that "without newspapers, taste for good books, music and drama would not have its present democracy".

It happens that I myself contributed to this dictionary, but that my article, as there printed, contains some dozen unauthorised alterations. To round off my remarks above, as well as to satisfy outraged vanity, I add herewith what in fact I wrote.

"Literacy—the ability to read and write—is assumed in our day to be an unqualified good and an indispensable condition of culture. Here as elsewhere, we fail to distinguish means and ends. We do not ask if the things likely to be read or written are worth reading or writing, whether in themselves or to the human person concerned.

In civilisations other and higher than ours—in ancient India and China, in mediaeval Europe—the matter has been very differently viewed. The man of letters has been of a class apart, one for whom books and writing are the tools of apprenticeship and mastery in his own calling, the natural means of fulfilling his function according to his own way of life. Other classes have other tools, functions and ways of life; and the knowledge which reaches some through reading reaches them from elsewhere, the visual arts especially providing richer means of communication than we can now imagine. Nor does the lack of literacy imply the lack of what now we call literature, which is partly received by oral tradition, partly created

by the unlettered classes themselves. In such conditions memory is vigorous and the spoken language resists decay. Even now, the older peasants in Tuscany (officially styled *analfabeti*) keep a sensibility to pure idiom envied by professional writers; and there are still some of them who have cantos of Dante by heart.

Popular schooling to-day enforces on men in general a convention of book-learning aping the apprenticeship proper to a clerical class. In a non-functional society with slight intellectual foundations, it is natural that the bookish education imposed should be largely irrelevant to a man's future life, standardised so as to fit no one well, and undirected by general principles based on the nature and hierarchy of knowledge. Few are concerned over this; there is no doubt of the quantitative increase in literacy of a kind, and amid the general satisfaction that something is being multiplied, it escapes enquiry whether the something is profit or deficit.

Mass-produced learning for the people has had its influence among the still privileged classes of scholars, men of letters, and "well-read" folk of leisure. The inorganic aridity of research, the presumption of "cultured readers" ignorant of the greater part of the world's thought, the confusion of good and fashionable in the literary judgments of the genteel—these things are now more pronounced, though they have their counterparts in the past.

But the worst effects of enforced literacy have been on those for whom it was first designed—the poor who have been "compelled to come in" but are offered little better than a Barmecide feast—biased history, cheap science and a smattering of national classics soon erased. The few natural students are no better off than those of their ancestors who were schooled at some benefactor's expense or who bought their own knowledge of letters to read the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*. With the majority, their new accomplishment serves no ultimate end. For some it helps commercial advantage; for most it merely facilitates exploitation by political propaganda and business advertisement. Society at large is not intellectually enriched meanwhile. Learning and wisdom have often been divided; perhaps the clearest result of modern literacy has been to maintain and enlarge the gulf."

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