

## PROGRESS IN LITERATURE



I WISH to put before you some reflections on *literary history*; and from this general topic to lead up to the problem which the title of my discourse indicates—the problem of *progress* in literature. Is there such a thing as progress in literature? If so, in what sense? What do we mean by ‘progress’ here? These are the questions which I shall try to answer; but I shall have to go over a good deal of ground before I get to them, in order to approach them at what seems to me the proper angle. My paper would have been more accurately called ‘Progress in poetry’; since, in order to simplify the problem, and keep it within manageable dimensions, it is mainly to poetry that I shall refer. But I hesitated to employ—in Cambridge, especially—a title which might seem to verge too boldly on such a celebrated one as ‘The Progress of Poesy’; the more so since I am

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not quite sure what 'progress,' in Gray's Pindaric sense, exactly means. But what I have to say about poetry will, if there is any truth in it, apply to literature at large. I begin, then, with some general considerations of literary history.

#### I

The systematic and scientific study of the history of literature, on the scale and with the importance which it has assumed nowadays, depending as it does on the plentiful accumulation and assured preservation of books (to say nothing of their multiplication), is one of the by-products of printing. Indeed, literary history is perhaps only a special case of by far the most notable result of that invention. For it would hardly be an exaggeration to say, that with the invention of printing, civilization at last acquired something like security of tenure. 'Hours in a Library' are not merely hours spent among the achievements of the past; they are hours spent in realizing how obstinately the past refuses to die, and insists on transforming itself into the present: provided, at least, the

reader has in him anything like the intelligence of that fine spirit, in memory of whom I have the honour of lecturing to you to-day, and the library is anything like what Leslie Stephen would have thought worthy of being called one. Now civilization essentially depends on the ability of the past to continue into the life of the present; not merely as a mould or condition, but as an active energy. Once effectively break that continuity of past with present, and civilization, there and then, is at an end. Well, so long as books endure, that continuity is assured. The grand tyrant of ancient China knew where his enemy was vulnerable, when he wished to abolish the civilization that abhorred his rule; but, now that they are printed, the 'burning of the books' is no longer practical politics. It is thrilling to be told that civilization goes in cycles, or that a world-wide cataclysm is at hand; but a glance at our bookshelves may reassure us. There may be terrible things in store for the world; but, with literature in the position printing has put it in, it is hardly thinkable that civilization will ever again be *destroyed*, as it has been so often in the past.

It should seem, then, having regard to all this, that no study could be more deserving than literary history. But the devil's advocate is seldom at a loss: certainly not here. It is bad enough (I understand him to say) that *printed matter* should have usurped so vast a place in the life of the world to-day: that what our ancestors vividly took from life, we take, cut and dried, from books: that such a formidable, and such a steadily increasing, proportion of these books should actually be books about books. No nation ever had more reverence for literature than the ancient Chinese; yet, with the 'burning of the books' as one of the great disasters in their history, they declined to provide against its repetition by inventing printing, even though they had got as far as inventing moveable types. This need not surprise us. They invented gunpowder, but they declined to invent guns: they were content with fireworks. Can they have been governed by a similar prudence when, having invented moveable types, they refrained from inventing printing? Did their prophetic instinct warn them by some such vision as that in which John Davidson saw

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the future of Europe—a multitude of people, each balancing a lofty pile of books on his head, their gait oppressed and controlled by the weight of literature on their lives?

This kind of argument is, no doubt, too sweeping to be very effective; and does not really touch, though it may approach, the question of literary history. Moreover, the answer to it seems not very difficult. ‘But,’ the infernal advocate goes on, ‘the answer to it must assume that those books on which printing confers immortality deserve their immortality. That, I say, would be bad enough in the long run: it scarcely lessens the horror of Davidson’s vision of humanity in its book-ridden future. But the point is, that with the advent of literary history, it is no longer true that printed immortality is the reward of merit:

the time has been  
 That, when the brains were out, the man  
 would die,  
 And there an end;

and so with books. But now they do not die; literary history sees to that; the immortality of books is wholesale, indiscriminating,

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whether there are brains in them or not. “He that raises a Library,” says William Wotton, in his *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, “he that raises a Library, takes in Books of all Values; since bad Books have their Uses to Learned Men, as well as good ones.” It is too true: very often the worst books give the clearest reflexion of tendencies, influences, fashions, conventions, movements, and other matters precious to the literary historian: it is the very absence of that confusing and unaccountable element, genius, that endears them to him. Look, for instance, at *The Castle of Otranto*. Candidly, would it be possible to find, on any bookstall to-day, trash sillier than this? But it is trash of the utmost importance in the history of English literature. No one can pretend to understand the growth of the romantic movement who has not studied this imbecility. It is a typical case. The flotsam of current literature is zealously preserved, the jetsam of the past anxiously rescued. Wotton supposes<sup>1</sup> that his remark would be as true of Alexandria as

<sup>1</sup> But he obviously misunderstands Temple’s argument here.

of any modern library. If it were so, a kindly catastrophe set that right. But nowadays, with literature secured and perpetuated by the multiplying art of printing, not only our national libraries, desperately digging pits to contain the masses of typography entrusted to them, but all the reference libraries in every considerable town, are piously storing immortal rubbish for the benefit of those who study, or will study, literary history.'

The sting of this is in its tail. For certainly, considering the material that is being collected for it, the *future* of literary history, if it is to be carried on with the ideals of minute, impartial and intensive study which now inspire it, is not a comfortable thing to think of. But human nature has a knack of adjusting itself, and getting out of impossible situations; and it should always be possible to make the most voracious glutton exercise some principle of selection, by presenting him with a bill of fare sufficiently enormous. As things are at present, however, we may perhaps allow this much force to the reasoning of the devil's advocate: that if we are to understand the history of literature, a

certain number of books must be read which would not be worth reading otherwise, and of which it may be said that only literary history keeps them alive. And suppose we do understand the history of literature: what is the good of that? Why, the good of it is just this: that without an understanding of literary history, no author can be properly appreciated—no author can give us all the enjoyment he is capable of giving. I do not mean that we are enabled to make excuses for shortcomings due to a writer's period and surroundings, or for out-of-date fashions and conventions. Such things, aesthetically speaking, can never be excused; though it is often decent to ignore them, and often interesting to account for them. But what I mean is just this: that the better we see an author's place in the history of literature, the better we see his merits as an individual artist.

This has been thought a paradox; and since this is, at bottom, the real reason for the existence of literary history, its denial has been urged against the very possibility of any such thing as literary history. But really it is no more of a paradox than to say that you get



more out of the *Aeneid* if you know the *Georgics*, more out of the *Divine Comedy* if you know the *Vita Nuova*, more out of *Hamlet* if you know the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Yet the objection has some weight, and is worth noticing. We may put it in this way. If a work of pure literature has any merit at all, the merit will be unique. Unless it can give us something we cannot get elsewhere, it will not count as literature; it certainly will not survive—except, perhaps, as an historical document to be studied, admittedly, in the interests of those works which *have* merit. But indeed, provided the author be competent and sincere, how can a work of art be anything else but unique? It can never occur again, unless the same experience could happen again to the same man at the same moment. But we need not consider the doctrine of eternal recurrence, any more than we need consider forgers and copyists. Now how can there be any continuity between things each one of which exists by being unique? And how can there be any history of things between which there is no continuity?

This is not a merely theoretical objection. That it does indicate a real difficulty, literary history itself too often shows—or rather, the failure of literary history to justify its name. For sometimes it deals with literature, but is not history; and sometimes it is history, but not of literature. To describe and criticize, in chronological order, a series of works of art is not to write history; and if the series of criticisms be merged in a series of biographies, with full accounts of ancestry, education, and so forth, even then it will not be history, unless very indirectly: that is to say, unless it can show how a man's art is the product of his life, and his life the product of his time and circumstance: both of which are enterprises requiring talents more than human. On the other hand, to write, however justly, the history of ideas and sentiments, of intellectual, social and political conditions, and of the way these are reflected in literature, is not to write the history of literature; for literature does not consist of these things, nor even of the way it reflects these things. Between these two modes of failure, a compromise is possible, which yields a third; and