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Edited by John Drinkwater
Excerpt
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SIR HENRY TAYLOR

By *Lascelles Abercrombie*

The history of literature inevitably presents itself as a series of *periods*, which are not merely chronological partitions, but rather characteristic stages in the process of literature. Literary history, indeed, cannot be content simply to describe the sequence of literary events; it is not the sequence of things, but the connexion of things, that makes history. The chronology of literature, however, is sometimes at odds with the periods which literary history displays. The year 1850, for instance, might justly be called the very heyday of the Victorian period; not merely by chronology, but because in that year were published those two perfect specimens of Victorianism, *In Memoriam* and *David Copperfield*. But in that same year there also entered into the process of English literature *The Prelude* and *Death's Jest Book*. Right in the midst of Victorianism chronology records the appearance of two books as alien as anything possibly could be from whatever may be meant by Victorianism. Nothing could better exhibit the artifice of literary periods. For, though it may be interesting to know when a book was written, the date that counts in history is the date of publication; it is then that a book begins, properly speaking, to be literature. The entry into English literature of the greatest poem of the pre-Victorian period was a Victorian event; and the real

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importance of that most un-Victorian poet, Beddoes, commences in the year of *In Memoriam*.

It may perhaps be objected that *The Prelude* and *Death's Jest Book* were both unnaturally delayed in their publication; but that does not alter the actual position, which is, that in chronological fact one period is thoroughly telescoped into another. And if we come down ten years or so, into the 'sixties, we find another instance of this, equally striking though far less important, against which no such objection can be made. Sir Henry Taylor was a man born to confound, so far as in him lay, the periods of literary history. His first book was published in 1827; and both by its date and by its nature (it is an unstageable poetic drama), appears to belong to that brief epilogue to the Romantic movement which, roughly speaking, fills the gap between Byron and Tennyson: Taylor's *Isaac Comnenus* would seem to group itself naturally enough with Beddoes' *Bride's Tragedy* and Darley's *Sylvia*. And for thirty-five years Taylor went on producing, at long intervals, the same kind of poem; never without Victorian applause, but never with any real assimilation to Victorianism. A survey of English literature in the 'sixties could hardly omit this placidly but stubbornly un-Victorian figure. That indeed might be said of the three previous, and perhaps of the two following, decades. But he is peculiarly noticeable in the 'sixties: in 1862 the last of his dramatic poems was published, and in 1864 he summed up his whole poetic achievement, and definitely put his claim to a reputable place in English literature, by publishing his collected poems in three volumes.

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So there, in the 'sixties, he most unmistakably stands: chronologically *in* the period, but certainly not *of* it.

Sir Henry Taylor's most remarkable achievement was not in literature: it is the magnificent countenance of his old age, which may be seen in the frontispiece to his very engaging *Autobiography*. That, however, belongs to a time twenty years later than the 'sixties; and to a time thirty years earlier than his collected poems belongs what is, I suppose, his most enduring achievement; and this at any rate arises out of literature. In the notes to *Philip Van Artevelde* he says: "The history of Jacques Van Artevelde, the father, is more generally known to the English reader than that of Philip, the son". I will not speak for the history; but as for the name, it is Philip Van Artevelde, not Jacques, that is now known to the English. And that is entirely Sir Henry Taylor's doing. I do not know how far his dramatic poem is still read; but at least the name of its hero has passed into the tradition of English literature. That is something to have achieved. And of course it means that the poem itself made, at one time, a great and by no means transient impression. But it seems that, from the very beginning of its vogue, its title had a singular power of catching the public ear. As soon as the poem was published, Lansdowne House and Holland House welcomed its author to their literary routs: but they did not welcome him as Henry Taylor; in those exalted circles he went by the name of Philip Van Artevelde; one hostess even addressed her invitation to "Philip Van Artevelde, Esq."

What sort of a poet was this Henry Taylor? The catalogue of his work is soon told. In 1827 he published

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Isaac Comnenus; in 1834 his masterpiece, *Philip Van Artevelde*; in 1842 *Edwin the Fair*; in 1850 *The Virgin Widow* (afterwards called *A Sicilian Summer*); and in 1862 *St Clement's Eve*. All these are dramatic poems. The collection of 1864 includes some lyrical and occasional pieces; but they are quite negligible. There is also a narrative poem—*The Eve of the Conquest*—which is not without merit; though perhaps its chief interest is, that it has some faint resemblance to Tennyson's use of the epic idyl, and, but for its date, might have been thought to show his influence. There is, besides, a considerable body of prose. *The Statesman* (1836) got him into some trouble (since he was a Civil Servant) by its ironical account of the way to succeed as a politician. The irony is somewhat muffled by verbiage; and if it were stript bare would seem pretty mild nowadays: our politicians succeed by methods Henry Taylor's most extravagant fantasy had never dreamt of. Two volumes of essays, *Notes from Life* and *Notes from Books*—Henry Taylor, as a Civil Servant, had pleasant opportunity to reflect on both—also come well before the 'sixties. And his most considerable prose work, the *Autobiography*, an important document for social and political history, falls twenty years later. Readable though the *Autobiography* is, and often delightful for its simple candour, it is to his poetry that Sir Henry Taylor owes his place in English literature: that is to say, to the figure which, with his three volumes of collected poems, he definitely assumes in the 'sixties. It is, then, his place as a poet that I shall consider; and his place as a poet is the place which may be allowed to his dramatic poems.

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And that, some critics will say, is no place at all. The dramatic poem is a mistake; and mistakes cannot be allowed in poetry. I shall not spend much time over this. The notion is, of course, that the form which poetry takes in the theatre has no artistic validity outside the theatre. It may be noted that the argument against the dramatic poem would, if pushed home, become an argument against reading plays; obviously, when we read a play, it makes no difference to our enjoyment whether it has or has not been acted. Sit in an armchair and read *Prometheus Bound*, and it thereby becomes as certainly a dramatic poem as *Prometheus Unbound*. And since people enjoy reading plays, it seems a forlorn business to argue that they ought not to do so. But apart from this, the theoretical condemnation of the dramatic poem is itself doubly mistaken. The poet who uses dramatic form for what he intends to be taken simply as reading matter is doing nothing exceptional. All poetry takes its form from some original occasion or method of performance. If lyrical and narrative poetry are allowed to exist independent of the musician and the rhapsode, there seems no reason why dramatic poetry should not exist independent of the actor. But in any case (and here is the second mistake) to lay down *a priori* what is allowed and what is disallowed in poetry, shows a remarkable misconception of the critic's function. Judge by results: that is the only valid rule in criticism. And ever since Plato it has been plain that there are peculiar advantages to be gained by putting reading matter into dramatic form.

Henry Taylor, then, if it suited his inclination and his

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purpose, needs no justification for writing dramatic poems. It certainly suited his inclination; in that, he simply followed all the rest of the Romantics, from Blake down to his contemporaries, Darley and Beddoes. They all wrote dramatic poems; and all for the same reason, which may be summed up in one word—Shakespeare. Taylor seems never to have questioned his inclination to write dramatic poems: for him, it was just the natural thing to do. But it may be doubted whether it always suited his purpose. At any rate, he often writes as though he had no very clear idea what the peculiar advantages of dramatic form are. Much of what he had to say would have been much better said as narrative; and, though on the whole his purpose fell in pretty well with the form he had chosen, it also on the whole failed to gain all that it should have done from being cast in that form. But this was the nemesis of the Romantic attitude to Shakespeare; and that it was more conspicuous in him than in the rest of the Romantics was due to the fact that he was not, as the others were, protected by the poetic instinct which could partially avert it. For Taylor's adoption of the Elizabethan method of drama was purely romantic; that is to say, he adopted it without really understanding it. He did not see that Elizabethan dramatic technique was exactly conditioned by the Elizabethan stage; since he had no notion what that stage was like. For him, as for the other Romantics, Shakespeare's technique was perfect freedom. All you had to do was to compose a series of dialogues, explaining their occasion by stage directions. Thus any purpose could be thrown into dramatic form. It was quite

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unnecessary to ask whether the purpose itself was dramatic; it became dramatic by being written as drama. But of course the justification of dramatic form in reading matter is the production of an imaginative effect analogous with the effect of a play in the theatre. Not understanding what the effect of an Elizabethan play would be in the theatre for which it was composed, Henry Taylor worked out his dramatic poems, in what he took to be the Elizabethan style, without any regard for an analogous effect in his reading matter. It suited him well enough to make his characters live entirely by their self-revelation; it did not suit him by any means so well to make the action of his poems exist entirely by being embodied in the dialogue of such characters.

In this misconception of the form he adopted, Taylor goes with the Romantics: though, as I have said, the other Romantics were saved by their poetic instinct, so far as the justification of their dramatic poems as reading matter is concerned. But in other respects Taylor belongs no more to Romanticism than he does to Victorianism. He had a profound admiration for Wordsworth and Coleridge, and delighted to invoke their authority for his principles: but these were merely the external principles of poetry, the scaffolding of poetic construction. There is nothing of Wordsworth or Coleridge in what he built by means of these principles. He reflected much on man and nature: but without anything like Wordsworth's pantheism or Coleridge's transcendentalism. As for Byron and Shelley, he repudiated them altogether. The one was all passion, the other all imagination: both had fatally neglected "the

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immortal and intellectual part" of poetry. This, as we learn from the preface to *Philip Van Artevelde*, is what he undertook to supply. But not without the other ingredients. "I would have no man depress his imagination," he says: "but I would have him raise his reason to be its equipoise." This is sound doctrine enough; equally sound is his warning against the conscious endeavour to write beautifully. Mrs Shelley had said of her husband's work: "every line and word he wrote is instinct with peculiar beauty". To which Taylor replies: "let no man sit down to write with the purpose of making every line and word beautiful and peculiar. The only effect of such an endeavour will be to corrupt his judgment and confound his understanding". This, in his opinion, was what had happened to Shelley; but of course Mary Shelley had said nothing whatever about Shelley sitting down to write *with the purpose* of making every line beautiful: she merely said that every line *was* beautiful. But this is typical of the whole of that remarkable document, the preface to *Philip Van Artevelde*. It is a capital instance of the possibility that a man may have all the right ideas about poetry, and yet be a hopelessly bad critic. The difference between literary theory and literary criticism has seldom been more plainly exhibited.

The preface is, however, an invaluable comment on Taylor's own poetry. We can read in it the very picture of his mind—a large, intelligent, self-possessed mind, which took itself seriously, and had good reason to do so; which could contemplate itself very coolly, but never thought of interrogating itself; which worked slowly, thoroughly, and equably, and always had plenty of

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time; whose temper was never crossed, whose purpose was never distracted, by gloom, by rapture, or by humour. The mind thus unconsciously self-portrayed in this preface can be plainly perceived at work throughout the whole series of the dramatic poems. Indeed, two of his main characters, Isaac Comnenus and Philip Van Artevelde, he endowed with some qualities that are evidently his own. They are both men of action, vigorous and decisive in their outer lives, but with the power of holding their inner selves aloof and in reserve, noting their own behaviour, and the affairs in which they find themselves engaged, with a detached interest and a keen, dispassionate speculation. That is how Henry Taylor himself went through life. He was not a man of action. He was a very useful official in the Colonial Office, whose domestic experiences were nothing remarkable. But that was his attitude; in these two characters it is transposed into the key of a life of action. He had the power of looking on, of watching with an impersonal speculative interest the way the world dealt with him, and he dealt with the world. This comes out very strongly in the *Autobiography*. No doubt the reminiscent mood would encourage it; but the whole tone of the book is that of a man whose habitual consciousness has been in that style. Thus, his family was anxious for him to get married; so was he. He heads a chapter with the words "Diligent endeavours of friends to find me a wife", and opens it thus:

I have spoken of the distress which was suffered by my father and mother and Miss Fenwick through the overthrow of my hopes in April, 1838. And mixed with the sorrow was

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the fear either that I might not marry at all, or that I might be a long time in finding my way to a wife.

They and other of my friends had for some years been anxious to see me safely married, believing that I would not be happy in single life; and also, perhaps, believing that, through some sudden captivation, some inadvertency of commitment, I might very possibly one day or another make a marriage in which I would be less happy still.

That is a curiously impersonal way to speak of one's most intimate affairs; but readers of *Isaac Comnenus* and *Philip Van Artevelde* will recognise the attitude.

In the two heroes of these poems, perhaps the most curious appearance which this detached, impersonal attitude makes is their repudiation of the emotion of surprise or wonder. Comnenus declines to be surprised by any turn events may take. When he, the rebel, is most surprisingly, as one might think, visited by the Princess Theodora, she says

> Thou well mayst wonder, and I think thou dost,
> Albeit thou show'st it not;

to which he replies

> Not much; not much;
> Ten years are gone since I have felt surprise
> Save at my own existence and the stars.

But Philip Van Artevelde's refusal to wonder at things is quite unqualified:

> Treading the steps of common life with eyes
> Of curious inquisition, some will stare
> At each discovery of nature's ways,

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