



LITERATURE

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LITERATURE is older than any of the sciences, as it is the foremost of all the arts. It is the expression in words of whatever man has done or felt or thought at any time since his inarticulate cries and incoherent stammerings were transmuted into language. Nor are we concerned alone with the written records, however formidable the mass of these may be. Recall the seemingly exhaustless temple-libraries of Assyria and Babylonia. Think of all that has been scratched on bricks and tiles, or graven upon cliffs, or painted upon tombs. Remember the epigraphical and paleographical remains of Greece and Rome and of the Middle Ages, the multitudinous papyri, the mountains of parchment, the smeared palimpsests, the wooden tablets, the inscribed potsherds, vases, what you please—writing, in fact, whether upon skins or clay or stone or bronze or lead. And think, as well, of the uncounted millions of printed pages that now convey the thoughts of men to men. When, in mind, we have marshalled all of this material, we shall then have noted only a part, and that the smaller part, of what we must in some way reckon with when we speak of literature.

For there is the literature which came into existence long before the art of writing,—literature which was transmitted orally from age to age or was forgotten almost in the making. The verbal reflex of action and thought and feeling is forever, in much the same fashion, still taking form

among peoples quite primitive and barbarous—Asiatic, African, and Polynesian—and the curious student may observe it to-day, just as he might have observed precisely the same thing ten thousand years ago. Therefore, what we usually call the whole body of the literature of mankind—meaning that to which we have ready access—is only a pitifully meagre fragment, after all. Literature irresistibly reminds one of the marvellous fecundity, the monstrous prodigality of Nature, which will spawn a hundred million life-germs and let them perish, in order that a single living organism may survive.

The immensity of the subject may well bewilder those who seek to reach any sort of generalisation with regard to it. Yet the very fact that our material for study is restricted to no one race or nation or time or stratum of civilization is in itself immensely significant. It reveals the presence of a universal instinct—an instinct which craves self-expression and the perpetuity of that self-expression. Literature is but a single manifestation of the will-to-live, the intensely human longing to be felt by others, to be really known by others, and, if possible, to be remembered by others.

So, amid all the woven words in many tongues, we can feel our way to a very broad definition of literature itself. We may call it an attempt at self-expression through language, due to at least a sub-conscious desire to perpetuate this self-expression. Such a definition is, as I have said, a very broad one. It is broad enough to include, on the one hand, the cadenced battle-yell of a horde of naked savages, or the measured ritual of a priestly sept or clan, and, on the other hand, it comprehends the delicate lace-like artistry of a lyric poet such as Horace or Hafiz.

Because literature is self-expression, and because the expression of self is always modified and coloured and variously controlled by a thousand subtle influences—geo-

graphical or racial or national or political or social—literature is an inexhaustible treasure-house whence every science may derive materials that are priceless. Here is a mass of evidence, of recorded experience, which bears upon all the problems of humanity in its slow progress up the heights. Without the literature of past ages the genetic study of any science is impossible. Indeed, whatever the mathematician, the metaphysician, the jurist, the biologist, the astronomer or the philosopher of to-day may choose to write concerning his own pursuit—that, too, is literature.

Literature is not itself a science. Yet is there possibly such a thing as a science of literature? Can the whole body of literature, in the largest sense, be studied by scientific methods in such a way as to yield exact and definite results? And what, we may ask, is the definition of a science? I think that Lamennais expressed it very well: "A science is a collection of thoughts and facts upon which all men are agreed." This definition rests upon the principle of common consent; that is, the common consent of "all men" who have studied and tested the thoughts and facts which have a direct and necessary relation to a particular science. No science stands still. New discoveries and more profound investigations, by eliciting a larger knowledge, will modify its laws. It is true, as Herder wrote to Reinhard, that "the last solved problem of this world and of mankind reveals immediately a new one to be solved." Yet the characteristic trait of an exact science is that, at any given time, its expositors are agreed upon the fundamentals, and that when a change occurs, it is a change accepted by them all.

Now, in this sense, is there as yet such a thing as a science of literature? If so, in what way did it come into existence? To search for ultimates, to consider all the influences and forces which by action and reaction, by relation and inter-relation, bring about any definite result, is always

difficult if not impossible. It will be perhaps sufficient here to consider only the immediate causes which have established what, if it be in reality a science, is the youngest of all sciences. To acquire an accurate perspective we need go no further back than the period of the French Revolution. That great cataclysm was accompanied and followed by an extraordinary intellectual ferment. Old truths were viewed with keenly searching eyes. Old falsehoods and outworn traditions came crashing down with the fabric of that feudalism which had cherished them so long. The spirit of inquiry, of challenge, of analysis, which is the spirit of science itself, was rife throughout the Western world. It resulted in the genesis of a scientific method of approaching literature,—a method blending various principles that are partly psychological, partly historical, and partly philosophical. There is much that must be here passed over; but the really formative forces may be summarised in the influence of four great formative personages.

Of these the first is the French novelist, Stendhal (or Henri Beyle). His works are really psychological demonstrations. Fiction, long regarded as an inferior branch, had, after the publication of Rousseau's "Nouvelle Héloïse," risen to the rank of serious literature, equal to tragedy itself as a vehicle of thought. With Stendhal in "L'Amour," and in his novels "Armance," "La Chartreuse de Parme," and "Le Rouge et le Noir," there is a meticulous analysis of thought and sentiment, often morbid yet always remarkably acute. He declared it to be his purpose "to make of fiction a mirror which, as you carry it through the streets, allows every kind of image to be reflected in it just as chance directs." This promised, at least, a degree of objectivity, but the promise was unfulfilled. His books are everywhere subjective, analytical. He cares nothing for environment, but only for individuals. Their most inti-

mate thoughts and feelings, as they flicker into consciousness and then die away, he notes,—holding his breath, as it were, in his anxiety not to lose the slightest quiver. It is an anxiety which he communicates to the reader. We feel in studying his pages what Zola has compared to the curiosity of a young child, holding a watch close to his ear and listening intently to its tickings. Here is a predominant psychology such as pure literature had not known before. Not long afterwards, in Michelet's "Histoire de France" (1833), there appears a new development of historical writing in which enormous erudition drawn from the dustiest of mediaeval records becomes under the magician's touch so vibrant, so palpitating, so alive with vivid imagery, and so rhythmic in its cadenced prose as to be at times quite truly lyrical. It combines the patient industry of the scholar with the glow and rush and animation of the poet. Every document, every record, every letter is made to yield at least some small detail of costume, features, manners, motive. Michelet showed just what intensity of life could be evoked by genius from the unsunned archives of a half-forgotten past.

Almost contemporaneously, Auguste Comte proclaimed his philosophy of Positivism. This was apparently unrelated to literature although destined to affect profoundly the development of literary methodology. The Positive Philosophy with its Law of the Three States—the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive—involved the application to social phenomena of scientific laws analogous to those which had been accepted in the study of chemistry, of physics, and of physiology. His theory of "social physics" looked to the coördination of the unquestioned facts of social life. The static law was the law of order. The dynamic law was the law of progress. In the last analysis all the facts of the social cosmos were to be viewed with reference to their mutual relations. "Not only," de-

clared Comte, "must political institutions and social manners and ideas be forever mutually connected; but more than this, the consolidated whole must be linked by its very nature with the corresponding state of humanity's integral development, viewed in all its aspects of intellectual and moral and physical activity."

Last of all (in 1862) came that brilliant, epoch-making generalisation of Herbert Spencer, Darwinian in its character, yet going far beyond Darwin's extension of a few types in the organic world. Spencer would explain the relations of all phenomena by combining the ideas of persistence of force, adjustment to environment, and the theory of natural selection. In other words, he would unify the cosmos, and make clear the myriad identities and relations which are found throughout the whole. The evolutionary theory relates not merely to the organic world but to the inorganic world as well,—to the sphere of ethics, politics, and social order. It is biology made universal, noting the relations and affinities, the processes of growth and of decay—"a continuous redistribution of matter and of motion." Thus, his formula applies to everything. Spencer himself applied it to literary evolution.

The patient, laborious, and brilliant achievements of these four men—Stendhal, the writer of psychological fiction, Michelet, the master of historical imagination, and Comte and Spencer with their application of scientific laws to social life as well as to the world of mind,—may be taken as having laid a basis for the scientific study of literature. I have selected them as typical, being compelled to forego any consideration here of the great creative minds which, in other countries and in France itself, were gradually evolving a body of observations and hypotheses, all of which represent a single tendency. Thus, I must omit any account of the post-Kantian philosophers, Fichte and Hegel, Laas and Ziegler, and also that luminous critic,

August Wilhelm von Schlegel, whose "Vorlesungen" displayed the history of all literature as a process of social evolution. Nor can I do more than mention the Italians, Manzoni and De Sanctis, whose thought was so eminently fruitful. The four writers whom I have selected are those whose relation to the new science of literature can be immediately and clearly shown. They incarnate the spirit of their time. Each gave a definite impulse of which the effect was felt at once.

Already, while Stendhal was still writing, Sainte-Beuve had begun his finely discriminating literary studies wherein he applied to his own contemporaries—Chateaubriand, Victor Hugo, and others,—the same sort of subjective analytical methods which the novelist had devoted to the creatures of his imagination. Sainte-Beuve cared more about the personality of his subjects than about their works, or rather he believed that their works could be most clearly illuminated by the light of the writers' personality. He gathered every minute detail as to their ancestry, their lives, their habits, their peculiarities, their friendships and their hatreds, just as Michelet was doing with regard to the men and women of the past. And, like the historian's, his results are concrete, satisfying, life-like. Here is the psychology of Stendhal blended with the veracity and vividness of Michelet. Add to this the fact that, although his studies were based upon no conscious system, they show glimpses of the scientific *Schwärmerei* which was felt by all of his associates and which was in the very air he breathed. Even by his casual phrases he suggests it—the phrases which he uses to describe himself as "botanizing," as "dissecting," as "a natural historian of the mind," and as doing the work of an "anatomist" in literature. As he proceeded with his task, he evolved at least a partial theory of literary study, in recognizing the obligation of criticism to elucidate, to classify, and to attain a philosophic know-

ledge of the human intellect. But he admits, as well, that, in a masterpiece, no general principles can explain that elusive *aura* which is purely individual.

This last assertion was challenged, first in theory and finally in practice, by the most splendid historian of literature that France or any other country has given to the world. When Taine wrote his study of English literature, he did so in the spirit of the laboratory. From Stendhal he drew his experimental psychology. From Michelet he got his love for accumulating what he called "the little facts, well-chosen, full of meaning, amply verified, carefully noted." His passion for such facts as could be made to live and glow is shown in his opening pages where he bursts forth: "I would give fifty volumes of charters and a hundred volumes of state papers for the memoirs of Cellini, the epistles of Saint Paul, the table-talk of Luther, or the comedies of Aristophanes!" Like Michelet, he could mass his "little facts" and present them with a superb eloquence which Monod has styled "the gorgeous raiment of his logic." His rhetoric is, indeed, so brilliant that for the moment we do not perceive the coldness, the remorselessness of his science. Deriving from Hegel certain notions which he blends with the Comtian and Spencerian doctrines, he would explain all literary phenomena as due to race, environment, and "the moment," that is, the tendency to a definite evolution under given circumstances. Taine with his deterministic philosophy saw causes for everything. He saw causes for ambition and courage and truth, as well as for digestion, muscular movement, and animal heat. These are all products. "Virtue and vice are products, like vitriol and sugar." And so, too, a national literature is a product, like a honey-comb, and each work which composes it is a product, like each separate cell within the honey-comb,—the necessary result of some cause which the scientific mind can always bring to light.