

***LESLIE  
STEPHEN***



***ENGLISH LITERATURE  
AND SOCIETY  
IN THE EIGHTEENTH  
CENTURY***

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# **English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century**

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When I was honoured by the invitation to deliver this course of lectures, I did not accept without some hesitation. I am not qualified to speak with authority upon such subjects as have been treated by my predecessors—the course of political events or the growth of legal institutions. My attention has been chiefly paid to the history of literature, and it might be doubtful whether that study is properly included in the phrase 'historical.' Yet literature expresses men's thoughts and passions, which have, after all, a considerable influence upon their lives. The writer of a people's songs, as we are told, may even have a more powerful influence than the maker of their laws. He certainly reveals more directly the true springs of popular action. The truth has been admitted by many historians who are too much overwhelmed by state papers to find space for any extended application of the method. No one, I think, has shown more clearly how much light could be derived from this source than your Oxford historian J. R. Green, in some brilliant passages of his fascinating book. Moreover, if I may venture to speak of myself, my own interest in literature has always been closely connected with its philosophical and social significance. Literature may of course be studied simply for its own intrinsic merits. But it may also be regarded as one manifestation of what is called 'the spirit of the age.' I have, too, been much impressed by a further conclusion. No one doubts that the speculative movement affects the social and political—I think that less attention

has been given to the reciprocal influence. The philosophy of a period is often treated as though it were the product of impartial and abstract investigation—something worked out by the great thinker in his study and developed by simple logical deductions from the positions established by his predecessors. To my mind, though I cannot now dwell upon the point, the philosophy of an age is in itself determined to a very great extent by the social position. It gives the solutions of the problems forced upon the reasoner by the practical conditions of his time. To understand why certain ideas become current, we have to consider not merely the ostensible logic but all the motives which led men to investigate the most pressing difficulties suggested by the social development. Obvious principles are always ready, like germs, to come to life when the congenial soil is provided. And what is true of the philosophy is equally, and perhaps more conspicuously, true of the artistic and literary embodiment of the dominant ideas which are correlated with the social movement.

A recognition of the general principle is implied in the change which has come over the methods of criticism. It has more and more adopted the historical attitude. Critics in an earlier day conceived their function to be judicial. They were administering a fixed code of laws applicable in all times and places. The true canons for dramatic or epic poetry, they held, had been laid down once for all by Aristotle or his commentators; and the duty of the critic was to consider whether the author had infringed or conformed to the established rules, and to pass sentence accordingly. I will not say that the modern critic has abandoned altogether

that conception of his duty. He seems to me not infrequently to place himself on the judgment-seat with a touch of his old confidence, and to sentence poor authors with sufficient airs of infallibility. Sometimes, indeed, the reflection that he is representing not an invariable tradition but the last new æsthetic doctrine, seems even to give additional keenness to his opinions and to suggest no doubts of his infallibility. And yet there is a change in his position. He admits, or at any rate is logically bound to admit, the code which he administers requires modification in different times and places. The old critic spoke like the organ of an infallible Church, regarding all forms of art except his own as simply heretical. The modern critic speaks like the liberal theologian, who sees in heretical and heathen creeds an approximation to the truth, and admits that they may have a relative value, and even be the best fitted for the existing conditions. There are, undoubtedly, some principles of universal application; and the old critics often expounded them with admirable common-sense and force. But like general tenets of morality, they are apt to be commonplaces, whose specific application requires knowledge of concrete facts. When the critics assumed that the forms familiar to themselves were the only possible embodiments of those principles, and condemned all others as barbarous, they were led to pass judgments, such, for example, as Voltaire's view of Dante and Shakespeare, which strike us as strangely crude and unappreciative. The change in this, as in other departments of thought, means again that criticism, as Professor Courthope has said, must become thoroughly inductive. We must start from

experience. We must begin by asking impartially what pleased men, and then inquire why it pleased them. We must not decide dogmatically that it ought to have pleased or displeased on the simple ground that it is or is not congenial to ourselves. As historical methods extend, the same change takes place in regard to political or economical or religious, as well as in regard to literary investigations. We can then become catholic enough to appreciate varying forms; and recognise that each has its own rules, right under certain conditions and appropriate within the given sphere. The great empire of literature, we may say, has many provinces. There is a 'law of nature' deducible from universal principles of reason which is applicable throughout, and enforces what may be called the cardinal virtues common to all forms of human expression. But subordinate to this, there is also a municipal law, varying in every province and determining the particular systems which are applicable to the different state of things existing in each region.

This method, again, when carried out, implies the necessary connection between the social and literary departments of history. The adequate criticism must be rooted in history. In some sense I am ready to admit that all criticism is a nuisance and a parasitic growth upon literature. The most fruitful reading is that in which we are submitting to a teacher and asking no questions as to the secret of his influence. Bunyan had no knowledge of the 'higher criticism'; he read into the Bible a great many dogmas which were not there, and accepted rather questionable historical data. But perhaps he felt some

essential characteristics of the book more thoroughly than far more cultivated people. No critic can instil into a reader that spontaneous sympathy with the thoughts and emotions incarnated in the great masterpieces without which all reading is cold and valueless. In spite of all differences of dialect and costume, the great men can place themselves in spiritual contact with men of most distant races and periods. Art, we are told, is immortal. In other words, is unprogressive. The great imaginative creations have not been superseded. We go to the last new authorities for our science and our history, but the essential thoughts and emotions of human beings were incarnated long ago with unsurpassable clearness. When FitzGerald published his *Omar Khayyäm*, readers were surprised to find that an ancient Persian had given utterance to thoughts which we considered to be characteristic of our own day. They had no call to be surprised. The writer of the Book of Job had long before given the most forcible expression to thought which still moves our deepest feelings; and Greek poets had created unsurpassable utterance for moods common to all men in all ages.

'Still green with bays each ancient altar stands  
Above the reach of sacrilegious hands,'

as Pope puts it; and when one remembers how through all the centuries the masters of thought and expression have appealed to men who knew nothing of criticism, higher or lower, one is tempted to doubt whether the critic be not an altogether superfluous phenomenon.



The critic, however, has become a necessity; and has, I fancy, his justification in his own sphere. Every great writer may be regarded in various aspects. He is, of course, an individual, and the critic may endeavour to give a psychological analysis of him; and to describe his intellectual and moral constitution and detect the secrets of his permanent influence without reference to the particular time and place of his appearance. That is an interesting problem when the materials are accessible. But every man is also an organ of the society in which he has been brought up. The material upon which he works is the whole complex of conceptions, religious, imaginative and ethical, which forms his mental atmosphere. That suggests problems for the historian of philosophy. He is also dependent upon what in modern phrase we call his 'environment'—the social structure of which he forms a part, and which gives a special direction to his passions and aspirations. That suggests problems for the historian of political and social institutions. Fully to appreciate any great writer, therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between the characteristics due to the individual with certain idiosyncrasies and the characteristics due to his special modification by the existing stage of social and intellectual development. In the earliest period the discrimination is impossible. Nobody, I suppose, not even if he be Provost of Oriel, can tell us much of the personal characteristics of the author—if there was an author—of the *Iliad*. He must remain for us a typical Greek of the heroic age; though even so, the attempt to realise the corresponding state of society may be of high value to an appreciation of the poetry. In later times we suffer from the

opposite difficulty. Our descendants will be able to see the general characteristics of the Victorian age better than we, who unconsciously accept our own peculiarities, like the air we breathe, as mere matters of course. Meanwhile a Tennyson and a Browning strike us less as the organs of a society than by the idiosyncrasies which belong to them as individuals. But in the normal case, the relation of the two studies is obvious. Dante, for example, is profoundly interesting to the psychologist, considered simply as a human being. We are then interested by the astonishing imaginative intensity and intellectual power and the vivid personality of the man who still lives for us as he lived in the Italy of six centuries ago. But as all competent critics tell us, the *Divina Commedia* also reveals in the completest way the essential spirit of the Middle Ages. The two studies reciprocally enlighten each other. We know Dante and understand his position the more thoroughly as we know better the history of the political and ecclesiastical struggles in which he took part, and the philosophical doctrines which he accepted and interpreted; and conversely, we understand the period the better when we see how its beliefs and passions affected a man of abnormal genius and marked idiosyncrasy of character. The historical revelation is the more complete, precisely because Dante was not a commonplace or average person but a man of unique force, mental and moral. The remark may suggest what is the special value of the literary criticism or its bearing upon history. We may learn from many sources what was the current mythology of the day; and how ordinary people believed in devils and in a material hell lying just beneath

our feet. The vision probably strikes us as repulsive and simply preposterous. If we proceed to ask what it meant and why it had so powerful a hold upon the men of the day, we may perhaps be innocent enough to apply to the accepted philosophers, especially to Aquinas, whose thoughts had been so thoroughly assimilated by the poet. No doubt that may suggest very interesting inquiries for the metaphysician; but we should find not only that the philosophy is very tough and very obsolete, and therefore very wearisome for any but the strongest intellectual appetites, but also that it does not really answer our question. The philosopher does not give us the reasons which determine men to believe, but the official justification of their beliefs which has been elaborated by the most acute and laborious dialecticians. The inquiry shows how a philosophical system can be hooked on to an imaginative conception of the universe; but it does not give the cause of the belief, only the way in which it can be more or less favourably combined with abstract logical principles. The great poet unconsciously reveals something more than the metaphysician. His poetry does not decay with the philosophy which it took for granted. We do not ask whether his reasoning be sound or false, but whether the vision be sublime or repulsive. It may be a little of both; but at any rate it is undeniably fascinating. That, I take it, is because the imagery which he creates may still be a symbol of thoughts and emotions which are as interesting now as they were six hundred years ago. This man of first-rate power shows us, therefore, what was the real charm of the accepted beliefs for him, and less consciously for others. He

had no doubt that their truth could be proved by syllogising: but they really laid so powerful a grasp upon him because they could be made to express the hopes and fears, the loves and hatreds, the moral and political convictions which were dearest to him. When we see how the system could be turned to account by the most powerful imagination, we can understand better what it really meant for the commonplace and ignorant monks who accepted it as a mere matter of course. We begin to see what were the great forces really at work below the surface; and the issues which were being blindly worked out by the dumb agents who were quite unable to recognise their nature. If, in short, we wish to discover the secret of the great ecclesiastical and political struggles of the day, we should turn, not to the men in whose minds beliefs lie inert and instinctive, nor to the ostensible dialectics of the ostensible apologists and assailants, but to the great poet who shows how they were associated with the strongest passions and the most vehement convictions.

We may hold that the historian should confine himself to giving a record of the objective facts, which can be fully given in dates, statistics, and phenomena seen from outside. But if we allow ourselves to contemplate a philosophical history, which shall deal with the causes of events and aim at exhibiting the evolution of human society—and perhaps I ought to apologise for even suggesting that such an ideal could ever be realised—we should also see that the history of literature would be a subordinate element of the whole structure. The political, social, ecclesiastical, and economical factors, and their complex actions and

reactions, would all have to be taken into account, the literary historian would be concerned with the ideas which find utterance through the poet and philosopher, and with the constitution of the class which at any time forms the literary organ of the society. The critic who deals with the individual work would find such knowledge necessary to a full appreciation of his subject; and, conversely, the appreciation would in some degree help the labourer in other departments of history to understand the nature of the forces which are governing the social development. However far we may be from such a consummation, and reluctant to indulge in the magniloquent language which it suggests, I imagine that a literary history is so far satisfactory as it takes the facts into consideration and regards literature, in the perhaps too pretentious phrase, as a particular function of the whole social organism. But I gladly descend from such lofty speculations to come to a few relevant details; and especially, to notice some of the obvious limitations which have in any case to be accepted.

And in the first place, when we try to be philosophical, we have a difficulty which besets us in political history. How much influence is to be attributed to the individual? Carlyle used to tell us in my youth that everything was due to the hero; that the whole course of human history depended upon your Cromwell or Frederick. Our scientific teachers are inclined to reply that no single person had much importance, and that an ideal history could omit all names of individuals. If, for example, Napoleon had been killed at the siege of Toulon, the only difference would have been that the dictator would have been called say Moreau.

Possibly, but I cannot see that we can argue in the same way in literature. I see no reason to suppose that if Shakespeare had died prematurely, anybody else would have written *Hamlet*. There was, it is true, a butcher's boy at Stratford, who was thought by his townsmen to have been as clever a fellow as Shakespeare. We shall never know what we have lost by his premature death, and we certainly cannot argue that if Shakespeare had died, the butcher would have lived. It makes one tremble, says an ingenious critic, to reflect that Shakespeare and Cervantes were both liable to the measles at the same time. As we know they escaped, we need not make ourselves unhappy about the might-have-been; but the remark suggests how much the literary glory of any period depends upon one or two great names. Omit Cervantes and Shakespeare and Molière from Spanish, English, and French literature, and what a collapse of glory would follow! Had Shakespeare died, it is conceivable perhaps that some of the hyperboles which have been lavished upon him would have been bestowed on Marlowe and Ben Jonson. But, on the whole, I fancy that the minor lights of the Elizabethan drama have owed more to their contemporary than he owed to them; and that, if this central sun had been extinguished, the whole galaxy would have remained in comparative obscurity. Now, as we are utterly unable to say what are the conditions which produce a genius, or to point to any automatic machinery which could replace him in case of accident, we must agree that this is an element in the problem which is altogether beyond scientific investigation. The literary historian must be content with a humble position. Still, the Elizabethan stage

would have existed had Shakespeare never written; and, moreover, its main outline would have been the same. If any man ever imitated and gave full utterance to the characteristic ideas of his contemporaries it was certainly Shakespeare; and nobody ever accepted more thoroughly the form of art which they worked out. So far, therefore, as the general conditions of the time led to the elaboration of this particular genus, we may study them independently and assign certain general causes. What Shakespeare did was to show more fully the way in which that form could be turned to account; and, without him, it would have been a far less interesting phenomenon. Even the greatest man has to live in his own century. The deepest thinker is not really—though we often use the phrase—in advance of his day so much as in the line along which advance takes place. The greatest poet does not write for a future generation in the sense of not writing for his own; it is only that in giving the fullest utterance to its thoughts and showing the deepest insight into their significance, he is therefore the most perfect type of its general mental attitude, and his work is an embodiment of the thoughts which are common to men of all generations.

When the critic began to perceive that many forms of art might be equally legitimate under different conditions, his first proceeding was to classify them in different schools. English poets, for example, were arranged by Pope and Gray as followers of Chaucer, Spenser, Donne, Dryden, and so forth; and, in later days, we have such literary genera as are indicated by the names classic and romantic or realist and idealist, covering characteristic tendencies of the various

historical groups. The fact that literary productions fall into schools is of course obvious, and suggests the problem as to the cause of their rise and decline. Bagehot treats the question in his *Physics and Politics*. Why, he asks, did there arise a special literary school in the reign of Queen Anne—'a marked variety of human expression, producing what was then written and peculiar to it'? Some eminent writer, he replies, gets a start by a style congenial to the minds around him. Steele, a rough, vigorous, forward man, struck out the periodical essay; Addison, a wise, meditative man, improved and carried it to perfection. An unconscious mimicry is always producing countless echoes of an original writer. That, I take it, is undeniably true. Nobody can doubt that all authors are in some degree echoes, and that a vast majority are never anything else. But it does not answer why a particular form should be fruitful of echoes or, in Bagehot's words, be 'more congenial to the minds around.' Why did the *Spectator* suit one generation and the *Rambler* its successors? Are we incapable of giving any answer? Are changes in literary fashions enveloped in the same inscrutable mystery as changes in ladies' dresses? It is, and no doubt always will be, impossible to say why at one period garments should spread over a hoop and at another cling to the limbs. Is it equally impossible to say why the fashion of Pope should have been succeeded by the fashion of Wordsworth and Coleridge? If we were prepared to admit the doctrine of which I have spoken—the supreme importance of the individual—that would of course be all that could be said. Shakespeare's successors are explained as imitators of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare is explained