

The Wheat and the Chaff

An Excursion into English Prose—
19th. Century and After.

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When I was in charge of the Library at an English College for some years I was brought face to face with three problems—first, much too much has been printed; secondly, most books even by the best authors, are much too long; thirdly, a Reading Library is something quite distinct from a Reference Library — the former highly selective and stimulating, the latter comprehensive and ponderous. I went to London about once a month to buy books, and I visited Libraries at other Colleges and Universities, including my old University at Cambridge. I remember the melancholy which came over me as I passed—it seemed for kilometres — through rows of book-shelves so high that a step-ladder was necessary to reach the upper layers; and this in the section devoted only to English Literature and History. I remember thinking that William Caxton's introduction of the printing-press into England in the 15th. century was no undiluted blessing; that the Greeks were right, thousands of years ago, in saying that mankind solved one problem and scaled one height only to find a myriad of new heights before them; and that Bernard Shaw was at least partly right in accusing millionaires of endowing libraries to confuse the minds of the people, thus preventing them from taking direct action to put social injustices right.

This problem of proliferation is probably more acute in the English language than in any other because English is the first language for about 350 million people, and the second language for more than half the population of the world. As a result, the publication of books in

English is more numerous than in any other language. In this situation, what we all urgently need is guidance—forest paths, so to speak, through the jungle of journalism and labyrinth of literature. As they say at Oxford, more and more is being written about less and less. We must have guidance, and so we employ professional reviewers—men and women whose job it is to tell us something about new publications: many of them have not the time to read what they review, but with the skill of old professionals they probe here and there, and form an impression of a book's significance and value. Bernard Shaw in his *Everybody's Political What's What* inserts, here and there, for the benefit of reviewers who haven't the time to read what they review, very short summaries of what he has written! Serious reviews of contemporary literature are to be found in *The Times Literary Supplement*, in the more intellectual Sunday newspapers such as *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times*; in *The Guardian*, considered by some as the best daily newspaper in England; and in various weekly or monthly publications such as *Encounter*, *The London Magazine*, *The New Statesman and Nation*, and so forth. All these deal with the latest publications. But what of the literature of the past? There, as Hamlet would say, is the rub.

The literature of the past is enshrined in Histories of Literature, English and American—the most recent and authoritative being *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, which is essentially a work of reference running to many volumes, compiled by a small army of specialists in narrow fields. Is it really authoritative? Yes, in matters of scholarship and fact; but some of it has come under criticism in matters of feeling and taste. Literature, after all, is about life; and life cannot be lived at second-hand. Perhaps our ancient universities are too cloistered, too much like 'ivory towers'. It is worth recalling Arnold Bennett's scathing censure of Sir Walter Raleigh in the chapter on Style in his *Books and Persons* — Raleigh at the time was thought to be a leading authority at Oxford on the matter; and it is worth remembering that Nietzsche, himself a Professor of Philosophy,

remarks in *Beyond Good and Evil*, that the people who really understood human nature were not philosophers but Directors of large Banks. It is indeed extraordinary that many of our greatest writers never went to universities, e. g. Dickens, Trollope, Meredith, Hardy, Kipling, Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, Masfield, etc.

It is from France that the best one volume history of English Literature has come in recent years, written by Legouis and Cazamian — Legouis takes the story to mid-17th. century, and Cazamian deals with the next three centuries. It is, like so many things French, humane, incisive, sensitive, and beautifully written. It is best read in the original French, but Helen Irvine's translation is about as good as it could be. The vocabulary is very wide, and the sentence construction at times complex, so students should read it in their own language if a good translation exists. It contains very useful bibliographies of Lives and Commentaries of all the principal writers. Other good histories of English Literature are those by Arthur Compton-Rickett and B. Ifor Evans. Compton-Rickett's work, frequently reprinted and revised, is well-arranged, clear, and fairly simple; it contains many extracts from the various works he discusses. Ifor Evans brings a Celtic warmth to his assessments — perhaps it is for that reason he finds Matthew Arnold cold in his classic restraint. Apart from the various histories of literature, there are of course very many publications dealing with particular periods of literature, or with particular aspects or strands such as the Drama, the Novel, Heroic Poetry and so forth — their number is indeed legion. These vary enormously in value and quality, even more so in America than in England; and I have often felt that we need not only Guides to literature, but Guides to Guides!

Let us take a few examples. Among the best of the commentaries in a chosen field is David Cecil's *Early Victorian Novelists*. He is a professor in the Faculty of English Literature at Oxford; but he had the enormous advantage of being a son of a Marquess of Salisbury, with all the stimulation of the brilliant and interesting set which

gathers at Hatfield House, and in London. (Churchill, as a grandson of a Duke of Marlborough, also had these special advantages). Then G. K. Chesterton, with his very original mind, was not only an author in his own right but an exciting guide to William Cobbett, Dickens, Shaw and others. Then Bernard Darwin's *Dickens* has great charm and sensitive insight; for most of his life he was the Golf Correspondent of *The Times* which brought him into contact with a wide circle of men and women and one cannot help feeling that this non-academic experience broadened his humanity and made him a far truer interpreter of Dickens than the professional commentator, such as G. W. Chapman who died recently. Chapman was a professor at Cambridge, and an authority on Jane Austen. As far as facts and figures go, he leaves nothing to be desired, but one gets the impression of being "cribb'd, cabined, and confined" by them. Peter Quennell writes with verve about Laurence Sterne, Byron, and others; Hesketh Pearson is good on Oscar Wilde, but less convincing on Shaw; then there is Edmund Blunden on Shelley—but the list is endless. Every writer of distinction attracts a swarm of commentators, and one is irresistibly reminded of the old saying that "Big fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em, and little fleas have lesser fleas, and so on *ad infinitum*!"

What, then, should one do in this situation where there is not only a forest of literature, but a glut of guides as well? There is no simple reply, but there are three considerations of importance. The first is a question — why are we reading literature at all? Is it for amusement, or self-improvement, or both? Or is it for some other specific purpose such as historical research, or professional qualification. It is essential to be clear in one's mind about this point, otherwise an excursion into literature will be a 'mouch', an aimless, drifting walk. Secondly, we must avoid the all too common mistake of imagining that great writers are good all the time, and that everything they wrote is worth reading. That mistake tends to be fostered by the one volume history of English literature which is invariably termed "short" and which is invariably very long! Yet, in fact, the subject is so wide that the so-called short

history is indeed brief, selective, and exclusive. The great names are all there, and all their works, to the exclusion of secondary writers whose best books may well be better than the lesser works of the great. Furthermore, as David Cecil has pointed out, great novelists of the 19th. century are often at their best and worst in the same book; and as, without exception, all their books are much too long, how much better it would be if they were all pruned, and cut perhaps by a half! The third consideration in our approach to literature flows from the second — namely, that the best works by secondary writers are worth attention. A secondary writer is not a second-rate writer, but someone who has written perhaps only one or two outstanding books; or alternatively, someone who is not quite a creative artist yet can tell a story supremely well—for example, Blackmore, Gosse, Lady Russell, Wilkie Collins, Baroness Orczy, Vachell, Conan Doyle, and many, many others.

If we get these three points clear and settled in our minds, then we can approach literature in, at least, an intelligent way. We must next decide whether we wish to make a study of a particular period such as the Regency, the early, mid, or late Victorian, Edwardian period etc.; or some outstanding event such as a war or revolution; or follow a thread or theme throughout the years such as the English countryside and life, boyhood and so on. A period study is rewarding but requires considerable knowledge of the social and economic background to make it so. For example, who would believe that David Copperfield is living not only in the same world but in the same town as the Marquis of Steyne, or that Oliver Twist asking for more to eat at his wretched Poor Law Institution is co-existent with Archdeacon Grantly breakfasting sumptuously at Barchester, or with Major Pendennis dining at his Club. Yet Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope, were contemporaries — in a society of vicious extremes. Only a knowledge of history can make it all believable.

The study of an outstanding event is more interesting in French and Russian Literature than in English, the reason being perhaps that war

has never evoked great literature in England, and that revolutions have been rare and unsuccessful. If we take the tremendous upheaval of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars we have nothing to show in comparison with Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, but on a secondary level we have Dickens' *The Tale of Two Cities* which breathes the atmosphere of the two capitals far more effectively than a history can, and which, *en passant* as it were, gives us one of the most lovable and original tragic heroes in Sydney Carton — the lie direct, so to speak, to Aristotle and the Greek conception. Then there is that excellent story *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Baroness Orczy, a Hungarian aristocrat who did not begin to learn English until she was 15, but who later wrote all her books in English, settled in England and married an Englishman. Her work appeared both as a Play and as a Novel in the same year, and was an immediate success; the plot is very skilful, the characterization of Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney, of M. Chauvelin the French Ambassador, and others, is simple but delicate; above all, there is atmosphere. Then again there are Conan Doyle's *Adventures of Brigadier Gerard* which, in some ways, are better than his more famous Sherlock Holmes detective stories where the author is obliged to end on an anti-climax note by having to explain how the thing was done. There is more humour in Gerard, an old soldier drinking his wine and telling his stories of derring-do in the days of Napoleon, with a thinly-veiled admiration of himself. He tells the stories of his youth with great gusto and colour.

The next great war was World War 1, but the great books came to us from abroad. The outstanding work was Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* which, by mingling the poetic with the brutal, brought out the bestiality of war as nothing else could — the title itself is a key to the book. Remarque was a Prussian officer but of French descent, and he brings a Gallic sensitivity to his German experiences. The conclusion of the book typifies the theme — the young soldier, having lost his faith and his innocence in the slaughter-house of war, stretches out his hand to catch a butterfly one early morning, and is

shot by a sniper when all is quiet on the Western Front. Then, from America came *Company K*—a collection of very strong, and sometimes beautiful, short stories; and Hemingway's epic, *A Farewell to Arms*. From the German Jewish community came *The Case of Sergeant Grisca* by Arnold Zweig—too long, but in its way a minor classic—we see the helplessness of the individual in face of impersonal government organizations, as well as the helplessness of the kindly-disposed people in those organizations. In England the best known works about World War 1 are *Journey's End* by R. C. Sherriff, which was a Play; and Ernest Raymond's *Tell England*. Both are rather sentimentalized accounts of how the clean-cut, upper class, young Englishmen from the Public Schools met the awful challenge of life and death on the bloody fields of France. Then there are Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, both of which have a poetic quality.

Great events tend to produce "clusters" of books, and before leaving this topic let us remember a few of the writers in the period which we are considering—the 19th. Century and After—who belong to this period but who wrote, for the most part, of great events outside it. There is Sir Walter Scott, who could write so very well, but who would be so much the better if he were so much the briefer—a case for the axeman rather than the pruner! And let us not forget Harrison Ainsworth despite his incurable immaturity; or Stanley Weyman—both of whom had very considerable descriptive powers and a feeling for the past, although neither had the power and genius of Dumas or Hugo. Then there is that little classic of its kind, *The Mutiny and Piratical Seizure of H.M.S. Bounty*, usually referred to as *The Mutiny of the Bounty*, by Sir John Barrow which of course is a true story, and one of the most remarkable, in the the history of the British Navy.

Now let us follow a single thread or theme in the Prose of this period—boyhood and youth. Here we need an experienced guide, and really only those who have read widely can act as guides. Boys have received much greater attention in English literature than girls—and probably that is the case in all literatures. Perhaps one reason is that

the boy is expected to be an adventurer, a creator of new worlds, while the girl is expected to be the preserver of the home, of things as they are. Both have an indispensable function; but a little later in life, when girls become marriageable, they have more than their fair share of literary and public attention. Jane Austen's novels swarm with eligible girls as do the Brontës'. Dickens is never really happy with them but they are certainly there. They are prominent in Thackeray's works, and of course in George Eliot's, as well as in Meredith's and Hardy's. The best study of a very young girl is said to be found in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* which is perhaps one of the most readable books ever written. The book has a universal appeal because it is an account of strength and weakness—and we are all, at one or more stages of our lives, in a position of weakness. Jane Eyre as an unwanted orphan in her aunt's house, and then in that dreadful so-called Christian Institution at Lowood, is in a position of desperate defencelessness. And the brave little defence she puts up against her odious aunt and cousins, and then at Lowood, is a wonderful revelation of the spirit and courage of a little girl; later on as a young woman her courage was to stand her in good stead in face of the insolence and arrogance which sometimes goes with wealth. If we turn to Dickens we find him at his best in his portraits of young, innocent lads; and of eccentrics. It might be kinder to forget *The Old Curiosity Shop* with its over-sentimentalised picture of Little Nell, but we would do well to read the first quarter of *Great Expectations* which contains a charming picture of a country boy, Pip, as well as a vivid little study of a young girl, Estella, living with that most eccentric of women, Miss Havisham. Then there is that sympathetic and penetrating study of girlhood in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*; Maggie Tulliver's desire to be Queen of the Gypsies, and the steps she takes to become "Queen", is entirely authentic and typical of the highly imaginative mind of a clever little girl. From America came Louisa M. Allcott's *Little Women* which, despite its title, had very large sales, and which has earned a niche in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Then in this

century there was that remarkable book about children of both sexes, *High Wind in Jamaica* by Richard Hughes which has been described as primal and fiendish, as if Swift had written *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*!

The best account of a young boy's feelings and thoughts is said to be found in the first 200 pages or so of Dickens' *David Copperfield* which is something of a veiled autobiography. His sufferings at the hands of his step-relations, and his wretched school; his early years in London with the family of Mr. Micawber, that most lovable of failures; and his walk to Dover to his aunt, Betsy Trotwood and the aimably-mad Mr. Dick—these are some of the best things that Dickens ever wrote. But *Oliver Twist* also contains some of the best in Dickens, and a strong and effective denunciation of public "charity", pauper schools and cheap apprenticeships is none the less effective by being limited to description. Unfortunately melodrama gains the upper hand. In *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens attacks the cheap private schools for boys so common in the 19th. century; the school in question is called Dotheboys Hall, which of course means Do (or cheat)-the-boys, where the Head or Principal governs through cruelty and starvation.

Following the thread of boyhood and youth, we may turn aside from fiction for the moment to two quite remarkable autobiographies by John Stuart Mill and Edmund Gosse. Both are very readable and quite exceptional because both had remarkable fathers who seemed to justify the belief that madness is very close to genius. Mill's *Autobiography* clearly shows that his father regarded his son's mind as a receptacle for all knowledge; accordingly he began to give his son, from the age of 6 or so, what amounts to a university education, at home. The games, friendships, and pleasures of youth were a closed book to the father who thought that few, if any, of the pleasures of life were worth their price. Not unnaturally the boy suffered a nervous breakdown in early manhood. Gosse's father regarded his son as a receptacle for his own quite fantastic religious beliefs, and the account of this indoctrination in *Father and Son* (the only classic Gosse wrote) is ex-

traordinary. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about both these biographies is that parents, in those days, seemed to regard their children as their own personal property. Mill and Gosse managed to survive the ordeal, and lived to tell the tale; but one wonders how many thousands of others succumbed, in one way or another. George Meredith in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* also gives an account of a boy brought up and educated by his father, a wealthy and conceited baronet, who distrusted the schools of his day. Meredith is by no means 'everybody's cup of tea' as the saying goes, and both the author and the book are at times as tiresome as the baronet in question. It is however against this general background of education as seen through the eyes of Dickens, Mill, Gosse, and Meredith, that one should consider Shaw's impatience with all formal education which we find in his *Prefaces* where amongst other things he says that Tom Paine (the 18th. century radical thinker) was the ideal father—Paine fed, clothed, and housed his children, but smacked them whenever they came near him! In other words he did not interfere with their minds or feelings.

A great deal has been written about the Public Schools of England, which, despite their title, are the most expensive and exclusive schools in the country. Their condition in the 18th. century was deplorable, and it is generally conceded that Thomas Arnold, who was Headmaster of Rugby from 1828 until his death in 1842, gave them a new lease of life by introducing "respectability" into these boarding institutions. He seems, almost unaware, to have made two discoveries—the first was that aristocratic manners can be combined with middle-class morals and minds. (Later in the century, Queen Victoria personified this fusion to perfection—if perfection is the right word). His second discovery was that the average boy of 17 or 18 could be turned into a prig, if he is paid the price—the price being power. Hence his very successful Prefect System. Dean Stanley's *Life and Correspondence of Dr. Arnold* is the standard work—much too long, but in fairness to Arnold, some of his letters should be read. Stanley was a boy at Rugby under Arnold and was the 'little Arthur' of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* by Thomas

Hughes, a highly sentimentalized but the best known school story of the last century. Leaving prose for a moment we should also read *Rugby Chapel* by Matthew Arnold which puts his father's ideals in a finer light, as well as one or two chapters, which are still worth reading, from his *Culture and Anarchy* where we find the famous division of the English social structure into three categories, Barbarians (the aristocracy), Philistines (the middle class), and Populace. This provided T.C. Worsley with the title for his sincere and quite searching analysis of Arnold and the Public Schools—his *Barbarians and Philistines* is still worth reading. But some years before that Lytton Strachey had published his *Eminent Victorians* with one chapter on Arnold, and few people could survive his elegant but acid irony—his victims, if they are not dead, become historical cripples.

Other good stories about boyhood and schools are *The Hill* by Vachell, dealing with Harrow, Churchill's old school — Edwardian England springs to life again, and life was very good in those days for the fortunate and the few. An unusual little book about another school, Wellington College, is that by R. St. C. Talboys, who spent much of his life there — *A Victorian School* has something of the atmosphere of a Logan Pearsall Smith publication, delicate to the point of fastidiousness. Much stronger, almost brutal by contrast, is Bruce Marshall's very well written *George Brown's Schooldays*, an obvious skit on Tom Brown and Dr. Arnold's educational views, but by no means limited to them. He can understand the feelings and sufferings of a sensitive boy in the closed community of a boarding school; just as, many years before him, Rudyard Kipling showed in his *Stalky and Co.* that he could understand the mixture of the animal and the chivalrous in the young male. Kipling must be one of the most masculine writers that ever lived; both his prose and poetry have been widely misunderstood, and it is to be hoped that he will be given his rightful place in literature as one of the most original of writers in his feeling, thought, and style.

To descend from the sublime to the ridiculous, we should read Evelyn

Waugh's *Decline and Fall* which is a hilariously amusing satire on private schools, ancient universities, modern psychology, the rich—old and new, and indeed about almost everything under the upper-class sun in England. Apart from these full length books, there are many short stories, for example by Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence, and others, containing memorable portraits of one or more facets of the young or very young. And there are many essays—one which springs to mind is entitled "What Boys Read" which is to be found in George Orwell's *Critical Essays*, and which is a minor revelation in its way. Then, of course, there are an enormous number of books which are written for boys and girls, which make no pretensions to being good literature, but which nevertheless may serve a useful purpose in preparing the ground, as it were, 'for the shape of things to come'.

The thread we have followed is endless—probably in all literatures ; and is only one of a hundred threads which could be followed. It is given here merely as an example of one approach to literature. And literature is worth approaching. Locked within literature are worlds within worlds, excitement and beauty. But one must have a key.