Criticism after Romanticism

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4. Scholarship and literary history

History starts with chronicles; literary history starts with literary chronicles; the first usually have a nationalistic tone and do little more than collect a list of authors' names together with their works, whether literary, scientific, historical or religious.

In England, literary chronicles are found from the sixteenth century on. The earliest chronicler is John Leland (1506-1552), who was given a commission to travel in search of England's antiquities and records. Leland spent six years in diligent tramping, and produced in 1546 The Laboryouse Journey and Serche of Johan Laylande, for Englandes Antiquitees, geven of hym as a newe yeares gyfte to kynge Henry the VIII in the XXXXVII yeare of his raigne. This was merely an instalment of what he intended. Like some other celebrated persons, Leland could collect materials but he could not use them. He became a superstition. He lived on the reputation of the great book he was going to write, but, in the end, "upon a foresight that he was not able to perform his promise," he went mad and died. Leland's Itinerary was first published in 1710-1712, and was re-edited two centuries later. It is a failure; it is unreadable. (Sampson, The Short Cambridge History of English Literature, 133)

Other chroniclers followed: Bale (1548, 1557), William Webbe (Discourse of English Poetrie, 1586), Francis Meres (Palladis Tamia, Wit's Treasury, 1598), Tanner (1748), Mackenzie (1708, 1722). But the essentials of chronicle and history are different. History requires some philosophy of history, some general theory about human civilization; it is not a mere accumulation of data.

We have already mentioned some such ideas on history. The Renaissance had brought about the view that civilization had declined since the ancients but was well on its way towards reaching their greatness again. In the later 17th and 18th centuries the myth of progress is all-pervading; the guiding light shifts from the reconstruction of ancient learning to the new scientific and encyclopaedic projects. The Augustans have a sense that there has been a very definite progress since Chaucer. The battle of the books
in the late 17th and early 18th centuries is only the outcome of a sense of intellectual
independence from the classical models. The later phases of these views on progress we
have already mentioned: Vico, Hegel, Peacock, Compte and Marx present different
accounts of the historical progress of humanity.

As modernity acquired more confidence, it could afford to look back on the
Middle Ages with a more detached view, and appreciate its peculiarities without trying
to reduce it to modern standards. This will be largely the work of romantic historicism.
However, some change of attitude is already to be found from the Restoration on;
Dryden translates Chaucer and does his best to appreciate him. He also moderates the
classical ideal: the English drama need not follow strictly the Classical norms. These
norms may be all right for the Greeks and the French. But an English writer must write
within the English tradition, and should be judged according to English standards. Of
course those standards can be refined and can accept foreign elements, but they also
have their own merits which may have escaped the classical norms.

The Augustan view itself, as we have noticed, had required the contemplation of
two classical or Augustan ages, the ancient and the modern. In his essays Of
Poetry and Of Ancient and Modern Learning, 1690, Sir William Temple had
given this frame of reference a twist toward the primitivistic by arguing that the
modern situation was not a peak of poetical achievement but some where on a
downslope toward effeteness. (Wimsatt and Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short
History 529)

This attitude becomes more and more common during the 18th century. Thomas
Warton, in his Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser (1754), begins by
apologizing for Spenser's shortcomings in not submitting to the classical rules, but ends
with a triumphant declaration that the true spirit of poetry is to be found in him, and not
in the classical rules: Spenser is a "romantic poet" and should not be judged with
classical rules. The "Gothick" norm becomes universally accepted during this century
as an alternative to the classical one; the primitivistic fashion runs from Vico, Hurd
(Letters on Chivalry and Romance and Elizabethan Dialogues [1759]) and Rousseau
to Herder and Wordsworth. The eighteenth century was, significantly, the age of two
famous poetic forgeries: those of Macpherson and Chatterton. It was also the age of the
first philological studies of medieval literature (Tyrwhitt).

The primitive age of imagination and spontaneity is contrasted to the modern,
over-civilized age of manners and stifled impulses; past ages of poetry are contrasted to
modern ages of criticism or science. Hazlitt (Lectures on the English Poets, 1818)
speaks of a continuous decline in English poetry from the age of Shakespeare. Each age
has its own characteristic: the Elizabethans, imagination; the metaphysicals, fancy; the
Restoration favoured wit and the eighteenth century specialised in the commonplace.
Peacock speaks of the four ages of poetry; later these will settle into two: classicism and
romanticism, seen either as eternally recurring or as slow process of intellectualization.

Warton already speaks of using literature as a kind of picturesque document for
the study of history. This idea will be further developed with Herder's view of literature
as the expression of the spirit of a nation. Carlyle formulates this view in England:

The history of a nation's poetry is the essence of its history, political, scientific,
religious. With all these the complete Historian of Poetry will be familiar: the
national physiognomy, in its finest traits, and through its successive stages of
growth, will be clear to him; he will discern the grand spiritual tendency of
every period, which was the highest aim of a nation, in its successive directions
and developments; for by this the poetry of the nation modulates itself; this is the Poetry of the nation. Such were the primary essence of a true history of poetry. (Wimsatt and Brooks 531)

This Germanizing, idealistic view of literary history will give way towards the middle of the XIXth century to the French version of literary history. Taine's philosophy is positivism rather than idealism; his emphasis on determinism much greater.

The French historian and critic **Hippolite Taine** (1828-1893) explains his critical principles in the introduction to his *History of English Literature* (1863).¹ His aim is to turn literary criticism into a science; he will try to apply the scientific methods which were being developed at the time to the study of literature.

Literature is understood to be a document for the analysis of a culture, of a specific age and people: "a work of literature is not a mere play of imagination, a solitary caprice of a heated brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners, a type of a certain kind of mind" (602). We have to analyse the feelings and ideas in the work, until we discover the man behind the work. Works are lifeless, but they will lead us to a real, living existence, that of the author. Everything in the work is a symbol of the psychology of the author. But the science of literature does not end in the author. Just as the work represents the author, the author in his turn will be a representative of a people and their moral condition. So, literature is not studied in itself—Taine is the very opposite of the followers of Art for Art's sake. The study of literature is a part of the historical studies; it is only a step in our way to achieving a total historical vision. It is the key to other cultures which may be very different from our own. Taine acknowledges himself indebted to Lessing, Walter Scott, Chateaubriand, Michelet and Sainte-Beuve.

Moral phenomena, social phenomena, do not spring from nowhere. The differences between cultures have some definite causes. "The principle of determinism implied by Marx and Engels is present in Taine's methodology" (Adams 601). There are three such causes: race, environment, and age.

- There are universal and permanent traits belonging to men of the same race, some traits which remain unchanged in spite of migrations and the passage of history. "As in mineralogy the crystals, however diverse, spring form certain simple physical form, so in history, civilizations, however diverse, are derived from certain simple spiritual forms" (606). Here Taine is an idealist: he believes that the different spiritual tendencies of the races come from the specific way in which their concepts are formed. The Chinese have a tendency to develop vague and mechanical concepts; the concepts of the Semites are also vague, but they are poetical, sublime. And the Aryans see the world with precise and poetical concepts.

- The racially ingrained tendencies in a people develop in different ways under different environments and in different times. The combination of all three factors will determine which people will flourish and attain to greatness in a specific moment in history.

Art, philosophy and religion all spring from the same principle: the conception of the world of a specific people. The art of a people is its philosophy made sensible. Literature, in particular, is the best document available to us for the study of the past. It

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¹ Rpt. in Adams 602-614.
is more determined than religion or philosophy; it reveals us with great clarity the world conception of an age through the world conception of some of its most perceptive representatives; it leads us to social psychology through individual psychology. "In this light, a great poem, a fine novel, the confession of a superior man, are more instructive than a heap of historians with their histories" (613). This is not to be interpreted as a statement of the superiority of literature over history. Literature is studied only as a historical document. Taine is opposing the external history written in the past, and wants to develop something like a cultural history. All writings, good or bad, are significant, and all must be studied. The best literary works are for Taine the most revealing documents; "their utility grows with their perfection" (614). But in the last analysis the aim of the study of literature is not aesthetic: like the rest of Taine's historical work, it tries to draw a bridge between physical sciences and cultural phenomena in the somewhat reductive fashion of nineteenth-century scientism: "It is then chiefly by the study of literature that one may construct a moral history, and advance towards the knowledge of physical laws from which events spring" (614).

The Frenchman Ferdinand Brunetière (1849-1906) is another key figure in the 19th-century views of literary history. He was against the relativism of many of his contemporaries: he wants to establish sound, scientific criteria for literary scholarship. In a way reminiscent both of Taine and Zola, he develops a theory of literature based on contemporary science. Brunetière's model is Darwinism: he will compare the evolution of literary genres to the evolution of the genres in biology. In The Evolution of Genres in the History of Literature (1890), he asserts that literature follows evolutionary laws of its own, which cannot be reduced to sociological influences. Genres have a kind of natural life: they are born, they develop and they die. Each genre is defined by its own laws, but these will not be the arbitrary laws of the neoclassics. Brunetière affirms that his laws come from the nature of the genres themselves. In Annals of Theatre and Music (1894) he affirms that the neoclassical rules were conventional, and were only concerned with the most superficial laws of drama. The essence of drama, he says, is a hero trying to do something, a character acting against some obstacle. The history of drama will be the history of the obstacles which counter the hero's will. If these obstacles are unsurmountable, we have tragedy. If they are merely superior to the hero, we have romantic or social drama. If they are equal to his strength, we have comedy. If there is an irony of fortune or a lack of proportion between the obstacle and the attitude of the hero, we have farce. "The actions of a self-conscious will define the general law of drama; the nature of the obstacles opposed by this will differentiates the various dramatic species." 2 Drama is a social genre, a public occurrence. It flourishes in the ages of national unity, of communal feeling. Those are ages in which the novel does not exist; the novel must wait for the dissolution of the national spirit into individualism.

Brunetière also insists on another element of the life of the genres: the influence of the works of the past on those of the present. Works must be understood in their place in history, taking into account all the literary influences which helped to shape them. The extension of these ideas can be found in Eliot, Trilling or the Russian Formalists.

The 18th century had witnessed the rise of rigorous historical studies and of classical philology (Bentley, Wolff). The methods of philology and hermeneutics were

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2 Brunetière, qtd. in Hall 220.
introduced to the study of the modern literatures by August Böck (*Encyclopädie und Methodologie der Philologischen Wissenschaften*). The rise of comparative grammar in the late 18th century is accompanied by a similar interest in comparative literature. Grimm's law and the Grimms' collection of folk tales are manifestations of the same spirit of historical enquiry: a search for the common Indo-Germanic roots of European literature. Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* still has this end in view; anthropological research such as Frazer's monumental *The Golden Bough* (1890-1922) also derives from the Romantic historical view.

Medieval literature is rediscovered. In France, Gaston Paris and Léon Gautier edit and publish the medieval epic and folk literature; Menéndez Pelayo, Menéndez Pidal and Américo Castro do the same in Spain. In England, Bradley and Skeat restore medieval literature, such as the works of Chaucer or *Piers Plowman*. The Shakespearian canon is enviously commented, polished and edited by such scholars as Furnivall and Hale; countless learned societies of antiquarians and philologists are founded. The scholarly edition of some forgotten work of the past becomes and remains for a long time the standard occupation of university scholars; a parallel work is being done in historical linguistics (*The Oxford Dictionary*, 1884 - 1928; Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 1926; Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*; Bradley, *The Making of English* (1904). The scholarly essays as we know them now, the philological reference works, the handbooks of literature, are a product of the nineteenth century scholarship; it did not exist before that.

The Germans specialised both in the microscopic philological analysis and in the grandiose systematic overview of the whole of literary history. This spirit of system is rare in England. Eneas Sweetland Dallas made an attempt at systematic aesthetics in *The Gay Science* (1866) but he was ignored. The monumental works are also less frequent in England. We have, however, Stopford Brooke's *A History of Early English Literature* (1892), George Saintsbury's *A Short History of English Literature* (1898), *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe* (1900-4) and *A History of English Prosody* (1910), W. P. Ker's *Epic and Romance* (1896) and *Essays on Medieval Literature* (1905), W. J. Courthorpe's *History of English Poetry* (1895-1910) and the *Cambridge History of English Literature* at about the same age.

In England, any generalization or abstract theory is almost invariably unwelcome, from Kantian or Hegelian idealism to French structuralism. The lack of system of many of these historians is joined to a devotion for the personality of the poet, a completely romantic reverence for genius: anything that helps us know the writer better will be welcome. The study of literature is often confused with the study of the biographies of authors; we get surprising discoveries of Shakespeare's laundry bills or boring accounts of Pushkin's economic transactions, together with valuable interpretations (e.g. Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare: His Mind and Art*, 1875).

Authenticity of authorship is often assumed to entail quality: the scholars often aim at demonstrating the quality of a work by demonstrating that it was a lost work by a great poet. Sainte-Beuve and Taine are interested in anything that may lead us to the spirit of the author. But a difference is made by other critics (Schlegel, Coleridge, etc.) between subjective and objective poets. A knowledge of the personality of a subjective poet will help you understand his work; but you do not need any biographical data to appreciate an "objective" poet like Shakespeare.
The historical method (or lack of method) is massively dominant during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Because of its reverence for detail and personality, it often came short of dealing adequately with the actual analysis of the works, and the problem of valuation. It is nearly inevitable, then, that critics concerned with aesthetic problems will often ignore or oppose the historical view. Bradley's Shakespearean studies strike us today as essentially anti-historical. Aesthetic criticism often means impressionistic, a-historical criticism in the 19th century (Saintsbury, Quiller-Couch...). In many academic circles in England it was fashionable to look down on academic research and scholarship; towards the beginning of the 20th century, aesthetic criticism is often an art of praise. In America, the German and French brand of historical studies, more systematic. Brunetière is a great influence, and Taine. Marx will follow. Literature is traced back to all possible influences working on it: social, political, psychological, ideological, traditional, etc. "The case for literature as class propaganda and social criticism seemed very obvious. The academically established techniques stood clearly ready to support it." (Wimsatt and Brooks 544).

However, there are also some attempts to systematize aestheticism: Russian Formalism, New Criticism. All this results in the surprising opposition between the formal and the historical views that is still found now and again in literary debates. The Russian Formalists will strongly oppose blind historicism; neo-historicists and Marxists often accuse the New Critics, the Formalists and the Structuralists of a lack of historical perspective. However, it has been the task of the 20th century to reconcile the aesthetic and historical approaches, and on the whole it has been done quite satisfactorily.

5. Early Sociological Critical Theories in the Nineteenth Century: Russian Critics

"In Czarist Russia of the mid-19th century, a didactic theory of literature was strongly invited not only by political and social conditions but by the actual pre-eminence of a generation of socially conscious novelists" (Wimsatt and Brooks 460). Government censorship of political writings was strict, and both novel-writing and book reviewing were vehicles for political and social criticism which was not tolerated in other media.

Vissarian Belinski (1811-1848) and his disciples Chernishevski, Dobroliubov and Pisarev introduce in Russia the Romantic conception of literature as the expression of a people, of a national spirit (cf. Herder's conceptions). In Russia, these Romantic ideas have from the start a definite social concern. For instance, they do not appreciate folk literature, which was a favourite subject of study for the German romantics. Folk literature, they say, is the expression of a primitive social system, a serf civilization. The social conditions in Russia prevented them from indulging in the Romantic primitivistic fashion. In like way, they will oppose the idea of "pure art" (for instance, Pisarev in his "The Destruction of Aesthetics," 1865).
These critics are all for progress, utilitarianism and enlightenment. They adopt standards of realism, social relevance of literature, responsibility of the writer and subordination of literary creation to the present social needs. The novelist must study his society, discover what is representative at the moment, and write accordingly; he is a kind of social analyst, a naturalistic reporter of social facts. "They merged the classical norm of the universal with romantic theories of mythopoeia in a pressing demand that the literary artist create human types according to new patterns of social significance" (Wimsatt and Brooks 460-461). The new realist literature will explain the political and economic development of society; the greatest authors have always been those who represented their contemporaries. Good art is art which is faithful to its historic moment. Dobrolyubov puts forward the idea that the authors need not do this consciously: literature is not the responsibility of the author, but the product of a historical process. The function of criticism would then be to explain the social meanings which are hidden in literature.

All these ideas are very close to Marx and Engels's conception of literature. The common assumption to these views of literature is that there is an objective world which is knowable, and that truth is the correspondance between the creation of the poet and the objective world. There is no question about the poet creating new laws or broadening our view of reality.