

ASPECTS OF LITERATURE

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Aspects of Literature by J. Middleton Murry

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TO
BRUCE RICHMOND
TO WHOSE GENEROUS ENCOURAGEMENT
I OWE SO MUCH

Preface

Two of these essays, 'The Function of Criticism' and 'The Religion of Rousseau,' were contributed to the *Times Literary Supplement*; that on 'The Poetry of Edward Thomas' in the *Nation*; all the rest save one have appeared in the *Athenæum*.

The essays are arranged in the order in which they were written, with two exceptions. The second part of the essay on Tchekhov has been placed with the first for convenience, although in order of thought it should follow the essay, 'The Cry in the Wilderness.' More important, I have placed 'The Function of Criticism' first although it was written last, because it treats of the broad problem of literary criticism, suggests a standard of values implicit elsewhere in the book, and thus to some degree affords an introduction to the remaining essays.

But the degree is not great, as the critical reader will quickly discover for himself. I ask him not to indulge the temptation of convicting me out of my own mouth. I am aware that my practice is often inconsistent with my professions; and I ask the reader to remember that the professions were made after the practice and to a considerable extent as the result of it. The practice came first, and if I could reasonably expect so much of the reader I would ask him to read 'The Function of Criticism' once more when he has reached the end of the book.

I make no apology for not having rewritten the essays. As a critic I enjoy nothing more than to trace

Preface

the development of a writer's attitude through its various phases; I could do no less than afford my readers the opportunity of a similar enjoyment in my own case. They may be assured that none of the essays have suffered any substantial alteration, even where, for instance in the case of the incidental and (I am now persuaded) quite inadequate estimate of Chaucer in 'The Nostalgia of Mr Masfield,' my view has since completely changed. Here and there I have recast expressions which, though not sufficiently conveying my meaning, had been passed in the haste of journalistic production. But I have nowhere tried to adjust earlier to later points of view.

I am aware that these points of view are often difficult to reconcile; that, for instance, 'æsthetic' in the essay on Tchekov has a much narrower meaning than it bears in 'The Function of Criticism'; that the essay on 'The Religion of Rousseau' is criticism of a kind which I deprecate as insufficient in the essay, 'The Cry in the Wilderness,' because it lacks that reference to life as a whole which I have come to regard as essential to criticism; and that in this latter essay I use the word 'moral' (for instance in the phrase 'The values of literature are in the last resort moral') in a sense which is never exactly defined. The key to most of these discrepancies will, I hope, be found in the introductory essay on 'The Function of Criticism.'

May, 1920.

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