

**THE OFFICE AND LIMITS OF
LITERARY CRITICISM: A PRIZE
ESSAY READ IN THE THEATRE,
OXFORD, JUNE 9, 1869**

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The Office and Limits of Literary Criticism: A Prize Essay Read in the theatre, Oxford, June 9, 1869 by Henry de Burgh Hollings

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HENRY DE BURGH HOLLINGS

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The Office and Limits of Literary
Criticism.

The Chancellor's

A PRIZE ESSAY

READ IN

THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 9, 1869,

BY

HENRY DE BURGH HOLLINGS, B.A.

FELLOW OF CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE.



George Adair Prof.
2/13/69

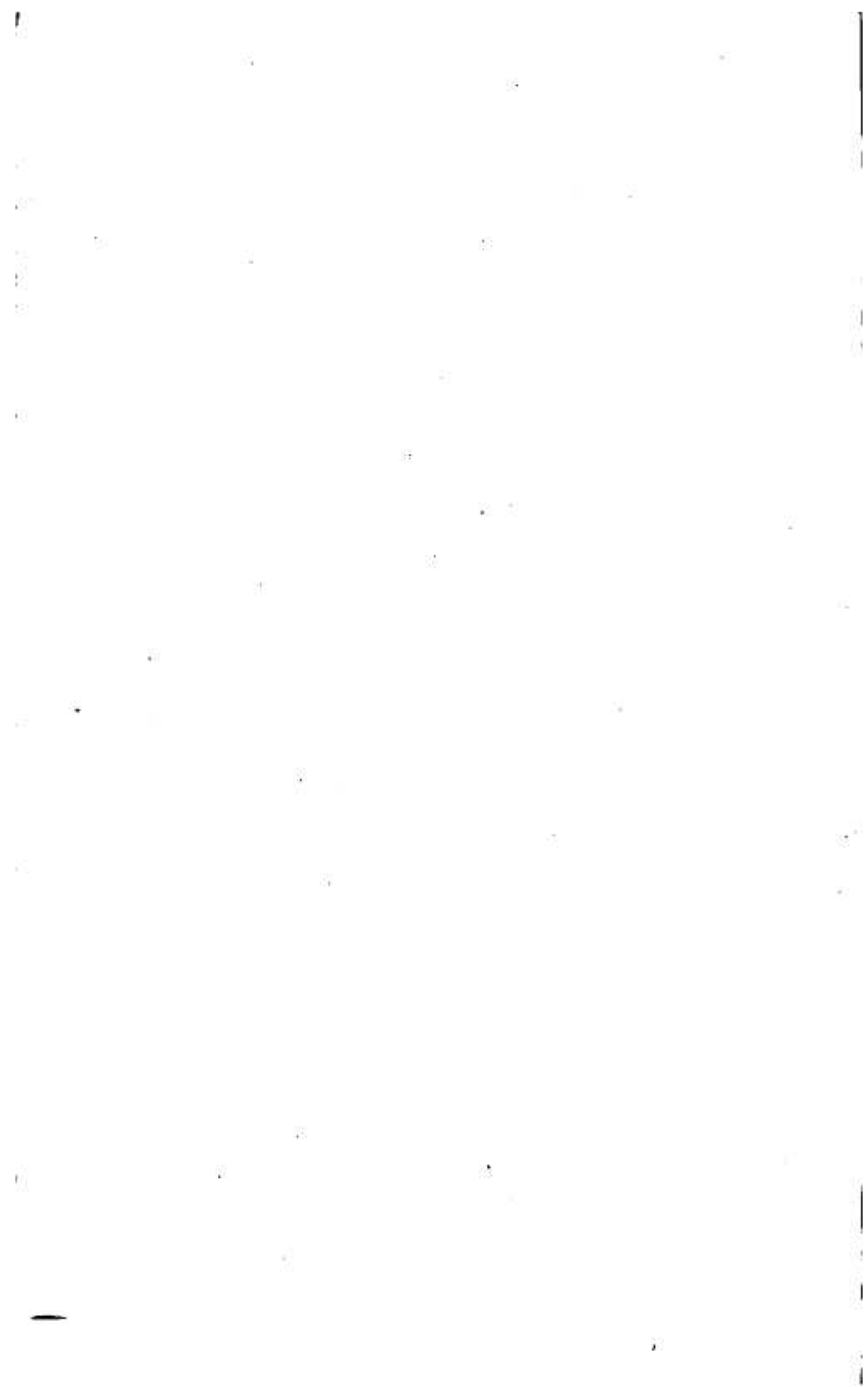
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The Office and Limits of Literary Criticism.

IF we look in Johnson's Dictionary, we find what at first sight appears a harmless and commonplace definition of criticism. The office of a critic is "to write remarks upon any performance of literature, to point out faults and beauties in composition." Let us turn to M. Renan. In his essay upon Channing* he thus estimates his literary merits:—"Il n'a pas ce sentiment délicat des nuances qui s'appelle la critique, sans lequel il n'y a pas d'entente du passé, ni par conséquent d'intelligence étendue des choses humaines." There is only a century between Dr. Johnson and M. Renan, yet Johnson's words might have been written in 'dusty Alexandria' in the third century before Christ. We seem to be hearing the last echoes of a strain of verbal and formal criticism that lasted from the time of the Greek grammarians and rhetoricians, until it filled the salons and academies of Europe during the whole of the seventeenth and the earlier part of the eighteenth century. Then came a rush of intellectual energy, followed by an age of political dissolution, and as a natural consequence by larger modes of thought and judgment. The older, or classical school of literary criticism, occupied itself chiefly with the form of composition, that is, with the purity and harmony of its language, and with certain canons of propriety and dignity which were generally accepted by men of letters, and corresponded to the famous unities of time and place in the drama considered as an art. If we open Quintilian or Dionysius, we find hard-and-fast rules of good writing, dissertations on the use of metaphors and rhetorical devices generally; we find also, it is true, many acute remarks on isolated merits or de-

* "Etudes d'Histoire religieuse," p. 374.

fects of authors, but the whole tone is artificial, it is created, as it is, by a desire not to sympathise largely and deeply with the spirit of a great writer, but, in Johnson's language, *to point out faults and beauties*. This last attempt may at times be useful, but at the best it is but a sorry compliment to the men of genius who wrote, and to the enlightened few who read them with true enthusiasm. Plato has passages that rise above even *his* wonted level, yet the undying charm of his master-works is one; one note of deep music runs through all. So it is with Shakespeare. One play as *he* conceived it fascinates us more than the whole herbarium of Dr. Dodd, who employed himself in plucking up the choicest flowers of his genius by the roots. Much praise is due, it must be confessed, to these colder critics. For instance the Alexandrian scholars did much to fix and purify the Greek language, and to them we owe the preservation of the noblest writings of the Hellenic race, while the Roman rhetoricians in their turn kept up a tradition of style, and may at times have quickened a lower but genuine inspiration in sterile ages. Again, when we reach modern times, it is impossible to overvalue the contributions of the French academicians to the proper understanding of some ancient authors and to the ennobling of their own language and literature. But still it is not unfair to say that while they did much to clear up Greek and Latin, and to organize their own tongue, they did little towards a fuller understanding of the Greek and Roman genius as incarnated in literature, or towards quickening the intellectual pulse of their own age.

Boileau, with his *Art Poétique*, is but a small advance on Horace. The happiest passages in Addison are not his literary criticisms, but his thoughts on men and manners. He was a good scholar, yet his sympathies in literature were all but bounded by the silver age of Latin poetry. There is, however, in Addison one bright exception to this general narrowness. He defended the nobleness of Milton against the unworthy sneers of Buckingham, whose very blasphemies against genius were pilfered from the French^b.

^b Cf. Warton's Ed. of Pope, vol. i. 243, note. "If you scruple," says Addison, "to give the title of an Epic Poem to the 'Paradise Lost' of Milton, call

And what of them? Boileau depreciates the inimitable Tasso, of whose very language he was ignorant^c. Fontenelle levels his puny shaft against Homer^d. Perrault, with all his taste and delicacy, has nothing better to do than to carp at Pindar^e.

Voltaire, with his burning words, was destined to set Europe in a flame, yet he seems to have valued his harsh, and it must be said, his barbarian literary judgments far above his powerful critical philosophy. In lesser men like Johnson we pardon such Vandalism, but it is a painful thought that Voltaire should have attacked one of his own company, a genius at least co-equal, Shakespeare.

Europe will ever be indebted to the Academicians of France, —but still their purification of style, such as perfected the Provincial Letters of Pascal, was not so much literary criticism as a delicate mechanical art, acting on an exquisite organ, the French language; while their other great work cannot be mentioned here, but will be touched on later.

We accept, then, fully the modern sense of the phrase Literary Criticism, as meaning, not so much the examination of the form, as an attempt to penetrate the spirit, of literature; as not concerned so much with language, and with abstract canons, as with high thought and passion.

In this view the only "felicity of diction" is saying something worth saying in nervous language; the only "sublimity," the intense expression of intense emotion. Round this aspiring literary criticism are grouped the kindred studies of political, social, and artistic criticism. Often, indeed usually, they are subtly interfused, but without pedantry, or an affectation of scientific vigour where no science exists: it may be possible for us to consider literary criticism, criticism of the human spirit gathered up in literature, as a distinct art.

Its broader limits, its frontier-level, as it were, between science, theology, and history, cannot be seen until we have formed a full theory of its great functions. Its narrower

it, if you choose, a *Divine Poem*: give it whatever name you please, provided you confess that it is a work as admirable in its kind as the 'Iliad.' Cf. also 318, 19, note. ^c Ib., 318, n. ^d Ib., 256, n. ^e Ib., 240, n.

limits, certain regions where it has but little place, can now be traced out. Literary criticism does not deal much with ephemeral writings, or with the lighter forms of prose in general.

Not with ephemeral writings. Passing sketches, fleeting *vers de société*, light comments on follies or passions of the hour, crude draughts of political or social changes, all, in a word, that makes up light literature and journalism, is not fit matter for the true literary critic. Not that he will scorn such trifles, or pass no judgment, but the great mass of educated men and women can do this for themselves. No special insight, no special sympathy, is needed. The literature with which the critic deals in earnest must be great, noble, and comprehensive; or if not that, at least it must be typical, it must be eloquent of coming strength, or eloquent of transition and decay. It must be the pledge of a new intellectual age; or, to borrow the words of a living speaker on Shakespeare, "the blossom of a culture that is dying."

Not with prose. It is clear that simple, straightforward writings, like narratives, biography, or letters, scarcely need the literary critic. There is or ought to be but slender art. Every charm and every fault is on the surface; no great intellectual phases or spiritual moods, excepting possibly the correspondence of a few men of genius, like Lacordaire, are there summed up.

On the other hand, lofty and ambitious prose, like history, is too scientific, too self-conscious, too analytic, to have much need of the literary critic. It analyses itself. Too self-conscious it is for criticism in this sense only, that the historian continually tries to illuminate his meaning. History is not self-conscious in the sense in which that word expresses the highest poetry, it is not penetrated by one powerful human soul, and therefore it is less fit for literary criticism. By prose of course is meant prose in spirit. The Byzantine monk^f, who wrote a description of Helen in eleven hexameters and some twenty epithets, wrote blank prose in spite of his metre. But the prose of "Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for

^f Constantinus Manasses: quoted in Lessing's "Laocoon," ch. xx. p. 135.

the love that he had to hers," is poetry. The poor miner who lately called out to his fellow when the deadly night fell upon the coal-pit, "*the light in heaven is not gone out,*" spoke deep poetry. Most of Herodotus is prose in form alone. The mystic experiences of St. Theresa and Swedenborg, though told in prose, are poems. What, again, are the "*Paroles d'un Croyant,*" that gather up the later agonies of the soul of Lamennais, but one great lyrical burden^b? So much for the plainer limits of literary criticism. What are its functions? To dogmatise about anything so subtle, so full of a light play of thought and feeling, as well as of intense sympathy, would indeed be folly, but it may be pardoned if a distinction is made between two of its subordinate functions and its supreme offices.

These lesser functions are to sift and to popularise. It is part of the critic's duty to winnow the chaff from the grain of literature, or, to change the comparison, to extinguish some lesser lights that are not of genius. At times shallow thinking, if couched in sufficient obscurity, false notes of feeling, if sufficiently sonorous, captivate the people. In his continual protest against intellectual and moral quackery, against an attempt to fix imperfect or morbid phases, the critic will condemn much lower literature without pity.

But even here the literary critic has but little work. These are tasks better fit for his weaker brother, the reviewer; and nature vindicates herself. In every age the lesser, narrower, colder, writers disappear. They live, perhaps, in a favourable critique of Aristotle's, in a passing sarcasm of Longinus. They live perhaps in the Dunciad. This work is done, less by literary critics, less by academies, though both these help, than by the judgment of the world. As in Natural History, as in Theology, so in Literature, there is an eternal process of natural selection. The weaker plants and animals die off; the less logical theories, the less sound conclusions, the less healthy spiritual moods, all fade and perish: and the same with books:—

"Ages of heroes fought and fell,
That Homer in the end might tell,

^a Gen. xxix. 20.

^b Cf. M. Renan, "*Lamennais,*" pp. 176—178.