

COLERIDGE'S LITERARY CRITICISM

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Coleridge's Literary Criticism by Samuel Taylor Coleridge & J. W. Mackail

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SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE & J. W. MACKAIL

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION

By J. W. MACKAIL

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INTRODUCTION

MORE than seventy years have passed since the death of Coleridge; and we now stand far enough off him to see him in intelligible perspective; he begins to take shape, to assume something like a permanent place and value. He affected his own age as a changeable and complex force, at first revolutionary, then constructive and interpretative. His influence on English poetry was far-reaching and profound. His influence on English thought was, as it appeared at the time, even greater. To the younger generation of his own contemporaries he was a prophet, a teacher who gave light on life. That side of his influence was in its nature transitory; for life is in perpetual progress, and each age has to face the problem of life afresh and find its own interpretation. For six wonderful years he was a poet and one of the immortals. That immortality remains. But he was also, both during the brief culmination of his powers and in the long succeeding period of shattered energy and fragmentary production, a critic of the first rank. In virtue of that faculty alone he was not only an expounder but a creator; and, like all creative work, his criticism has a substantive artistic value, an inherent vitality.

The saying that poetry is a criticism of life, so far as it is more than a brilliant paradox, has reference to poetry as the highest form of literature, and to criticism as something constructive and vital. In

this sense, not only poetry but all literature is a criticism of life. It interprets life and, so to speak, recreates it. But literature itself requires interpretation; for it also is life: it is a world of its own. The critical faculty as applied to the masterpieces of literature, and still more the critical faculty as applied to the art of literature itself, is akin to the creative faculty of the artist. It does not deal with letters as something detached from life, but as the form or substance in which life is intelligibly presented. Its interpretation is also creation. A sharp line can be drawn between the artist and the critic where they work in different material, as in the criticism of painting, or of music. No such line can be drawn in literary criticism; for the critic works in the same material, and his criticism so far as it is vital (that is to say, so far as it is relevant and worth preservation) is also a work of art. Criticism of literature is literature.

Like all the other gifts with which he was so richly endowed, and which he misused so tragically, Coleridge exercised his superb critical faculty fitfully and capriciously. It was often overclouded; it often ran to waste. The body of criticism which he contributed to literature has to be pieced together from fragmentary records; some of it from published writings, some from records of his conversation and notes taken at his lectures. But even so it is of lasting value and interest. What a great artist says about his own art is never negligible. Coleridge was a great literary artist, one whose mastery of

his art in practice it was impossible to deny, any more than it was possible to deny his subtlety of intellect and copiousness of eloquence. We have here the judgements in letters of one who had singular qualifications for judging. [For he was one who impressed all his contemporaries as, in no common sense of the words, noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in action like an angel, in apprehension like a god.]

This volume, as its title indicates, includes passages dealing with the art of literature in general, and in particular with a number of prose authors and prose writings. These include some of Coleridge's best known and most brilliant sayings. In prose, as much as in poetry, he read largely, and seldom read without making some comment on the effect produced by the author whom he was reading upon his sensitive appreciation and vivid intelligence. Among his criticisms on men of letters other than the poets are such things as the famous epigram on Swift, *anima Rabelaisii habitans in sicco*, or the equally famous antithesis between Richardson and Fielding, sayings which have become, as one might say, part of the thing they criticize. But they are comparatively few in number, and for the most part detached or occasional. [Coleridge himself was a prose writer of distinction, as a pamphleteer, an essayist, an expounder of artistic, religious, and philosophic doctrine. But his highest achievement in letters was as a poet; and his chief work as a critic of letters is in his criticism of poetry.]

This criticism, as it will be found collected in the

following pages, falls mainly under three heads. First, and bulking much most largely as it was thought out and recorded most deliberately, comes that which is directly connected with Wordsworth, and with the movement in English poetry which Wordsworth and himself had initiated. Next, but at once less full and less systematic, is that on Shakespeare, and incidentally or collaterally on the other dramatists of the Shakespearian age. Lastly come a few pages, brief in substance but of great importance, on poetry itself. These may be read either before or after the rest, according as we are disposed to regard them as the root-principles, or the summing-up and distillation, of the whole body of his criticism. But that circle returns into itself and ends where it began; and so it is well to read these few pages both before and after the rest. The editor has very properly chosen to place them at the beginning of this volume, as giving the essential groundwork of ideas, the scheme of thought, on which all Coleridge's specific literary criticisms are based. But, on the other hand, it is only in the light of those criticisms that we can gradually come to understand the ideas themselves and their connexion with one another. Only in that light do the formulæ in which he embodies them become clearly intelligible—if they always become intelligible even then. Without a sufficient knowledge of their applications these formulæ are abstract, and have not an obvious relevance to actual poetry or its effect upon us. But though Coleridge, in interpreting and accounting for poetry, followed a

deductive method, the definitions and axioms from which he starts were themselves induced from a wide discursive survey. His reading in poetry was large and varied; the response of his senses to it was of unequalled delicacy, the response of his intelligence to it was almost instantaneous; his power of analysing and recording impressions was extraordinarily great. In his theorizing he is really following the guidance, or at all events the suggestions, of his instinct: he is justifying impressions already made, habits of appreciation already formed.

Comprehensive definitions, or what purport to be such, in matters which deal with life, or with any art which, like poetry, is a function of life, must always be taken at their worth. They are not so much definitions as crystallized impressions. The thing to be defined is infinitely delicate, mobile, and complex. A definition can express one or another aspect of it, not the thing itself. The problem is somewhat similar to that which presented itself to painters when they set themselves to paint not outlines but the things indicated by outlines, not colours but light. The more the definition approaches reality, the less it becomes a definition at all. Even with Coleridge we shall find that his attempts to define poetry are best, are most helpful, when they are most obviously incomplete. 'Poetry is the best words in the best order': that is a mere improvisation to be sure, a piece of table-talk, but it is a phrase which he often repeated, and dwelt on with obvious satisfaction. It does not bear analysis; but it stimulates