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IS THERE A STANDARD
OF LITERARY APPRECIATION?

No mere whim dictated the request of the eminently sincere Tennyson that his last great lyric, *Crossing the Bar*, be placed at the close of every edition of his works to be given to the public after his death. When the poem is read, as the great Poet-laureate intended, as a sign of redemption from a meaningless philosophy, we realize that it bears a far more significant relation to the life of its author than it does to the reader; it is, indeed, in the poet's chosen medium, the expression of a pure, unalloyed faith in the verities of the religion to which he could give for so great a part of his life only the agnostic's assent.

There is of course little doubt that the ordinary reader gets something of the lyric fineness and simple beauty from the reading of this exquisite creation, even if he lacks the mildest pretense to literary culture; but there is a vast difference between getting *something* from the reading of a literary masterpiece and *getting what was intended* by the author. Even a fair understanding of a great literary work implies, it would seem moderate enough to assert, not only a grasp of the literal sense, but more particularly a sympathetic appreciation of the circumstances that produced the work, its relation to the life of the author, and just what the thing is that he is embodying in language for all time.

As was the case with many great thinkers of his day, the religion offered to the poet involved so many dogmatic demands that Tennyson could not give to it an honest expression of belief. Inasmuch, however, as he was a great thinker, he thought *through* his doubts and difficulties; and at the close of his life he was able to put the seal of faith to his questionings, his fears, and his many suggestions of "it may be so, but I can not say it seems to me probable." The essential meaning of the poem becomes clear, and the consequent higher plane of enjoyment, through the knowledge of its relationship to what the author had previously thought and frequently expressed in his earlier writings.

In the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* of the distinguished Cardinal Newman we have per-

haps as careful a piece of analysis of one's course of action as can well be found throughout all literature. In this we find the eminent Churchman explaining in detail the line of reasoning that lead him to take the momentous step of leaving the Church of England for the Church of Rome. While the splendid *Apology* is read by the few with due appreciation of its tremendous intellectual qualities and its significance in the life of the author, yet the wonderfully beautiful and touching hymn, *Lead, Kindly Light*, composed just before the author made his decision, has penetrated as a heart-product into the farthest corners of the earth and has become the favorite hymn of thousands who have never heard of the *Apology*.

But even in the case of a hymn the highest type of appreciation can not come from mere heart-acceptance. Not even so, although it is heard at those deeply moving occasions when we are looking for the last time upon the mortal remains of some loved one, to whom living, the hymn was a favorite. Faith and hope, it is true, rise high in our lives on such occasions; and it would seem then, if ever, the realization of such a production should be completely ours. Without, in the least, denying the high appeal this hymn might, and usually does, make to our hearts, under whatever circumstances it might be sung, yet it is plain enough that its real significance in the life of the author as a genuine prayer for guidance at a crucial moment furnishes us the key for the emotional and intellectual appreciation that alone can be said to do justice to it.

The crises of life, as of prime importance in life-direction and life-development, furnish us with the most dynamic literary records, those that represent rather the urge of genuine experience than the desire to produce an art-form. Hence it is, that a large share of the world's best literature is, to a greater or less extent, autobiographical. Such productions, to which the commonly used critical terms, "representative" and "characteristic," are not always strictly applicable, constitute the most genuine contributions of an author; in that they have sought expression as distinguished from those that have had expression sought for them. It is the literature of life-crises that furnishes us with the cue for the standard of appreciation of literature as a whole.

Among the productions of practically every great author there is at least one literary work that has the special significance of being a memorial of some sad, if not tragic, period in the life of that individual. The work may have all the literary finish and splendid interest of *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, the weird atmosphere of the magnificent *Manfred*, tortured by some ever-present and soul-racking memory that draws forth the Promethean spark of rebellion rather than penitence, the melancholy of *The Deserted Village*, whose memories still cling amidst the crueler days of success and achievement. It may take the form of a less obviously tragic *Journal to Stella* or be but *The Buried Life* of a Mathew Arnold; or it may take the turn of the delightful *Sonnets from the Portuguese*; yet there is the inevitable biographical element, the absence of a knowledge of which makes them only dim echoes of a rich possibility of wonderful music. To the extent to which they lack the reality of connection with the lives of their authors, they can not be realized in our lives.

We may read *The Sandpiper* of Celia Thaxter and get from it a dim impression of loneliness; but the mere reading of the poem alone will never enable us to realize the solitariness that was the little child's lot in life, unless we know that the poem is not an idealization, a mere figment of the imagination, but a genuine picture, recalled out of her life by the author.

The Sensitive Plant is as exquisite as the flower it depicts; yet without its biographical bearings well in mind, it is safe to say that the average reader must content himself with an impression of exceptional word-power on the part of the author; we realize that he has looked long and searchingly into his own soul and has drawn for us a picture of what he has seen there.

If Edgar Allen Poe had not given us anything of his critical and analytical writings but his *Philosophy of Composition*, we would be compelled to hail the author of *The Raven* as a master of poetics. *The Raven*, though a studied masterpiece of unique effect, is, unlike its coldly intellectual prose analysis, much more than a splendid fabric of poetic genius; it is the unburdening of an overcharged soul that sought its expression through *Ululume*, *Lenore*, *For Annie*, *Eulalie*, and *Annabel Lee*. They consistently support his theory of poetry, it is true, but there is a certain biographical foundation for them that

makes them as significant in the spiritual as in the artistic history of the poet's life.

George Eliot found it impossible to accept any of the commonly received religious beliefs of her contemporaries; still the Choir Invisible haunted her dreams and, essentially religious-natured as she was, a compensation creed came to her relief in the pathetic expression of *O, May I Join the Choir Invisible*

"Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence,
Whose music is the gladness of the world."

To what extent can our enjoyment of this poem be modified by a knowledge of its background? When would the passing of a judgment on it as a genuine, poetic contribution be justified?

We have come to accept the idea that all definitions of literature may be given in terms of life; hence, any method of interpretation that fails to make use of the fact that literature yields its full richness only when it is understood in its relation to life overlooks, we believe, the most vital point of both interest and possibility of real appreciation.

How close this relationship of even a simple literary production may be to the life of its author is well illustrated in such a poem as Bryant's *To a Waterfowl*. We have here an actual experience, a minor life-crisis, crystallized in an eternal art-form. The author speaks in one of his letters of the "very forlorn and desolate feeling one evening late in the year of 1816," as he journeyed on foot to see what inducement a nearby town offered him for the practice of law in which he had but recently been licensed. His future never seemed more desperate and uncertain. But as he watched the dying day, he noticed a solitary bird winging its way along the horizon. His eyes remained fixed on the gradually disappearing figure until it was lost in the distance. It seemed all at once to give him renewed strength and courage. His fresh hope was shortly after revealed in his lines *To a Waterfowl*, in the last stanza of which we find the expression of faith gathered from the scene before him on the evening of crucial significance:

"He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will guide my steps aright."

The Cotter's Saturday Night reflects the humble life of Robert Burns; its appreciation can best and most thoroughly come from a knowledge of the events and conditions that surrounded the home life of the poet. Wordsworth's *Prelude* is an autobiography of the artist, and can best be evaluated in the light of the life and creed he practiced. No less truly does Cowper's pathetic tribute *On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture out of Norfolk* demand for its proper interpretation a knowledge of the author's life and character.

Involved, therefore, in the reading of a great deal of the best creative literature is its realization in our lives. The neglect to stress this phase of literary training with the less imaginative accounts, no doubt, for the narrow acquaintance and limited interest in great literature on the part of most people. It offers an explanation to some extent for the preference for what is known as light fiction on the part of the untrained reader, as this type of reading has just those barriers removed that prevent the entrance into the more abundant life of better reading.

In literature, as in other forms of art, there is what Ruskin calls a "something at the heart of everything that we would not be inclined to laugh at." Real literature comes always from sincere effort on the part of the author to embody in artistic form an experience that is of tremendous significance to him. To get a correct measure of this experience that is of tremendous significance from the standpoint of the author. It is impossible for us to judge of the correctness of our estimate unless it is looked at through the mind of the author; and there seems to be but one way of doing this thing with any degree of sureness, that is, knowing the circumstances that brought the literary product into existence. The circumstances that produced the literary work must be imaginatively realized in our own lives, before we have any ground for the notion that we sympathize, appreciate, and correctly measure the product. If criticism presupposes an intelligent appreciation, this must be emphasized as the indispensable condition.

Who does not remember the travesty on literature teaching in the all-too-common method by which *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* were presented in his school days? While beautiful word pictures, indeed, and rich in classical allusions, they can have a meaning

only in relation to the life of Milton at that period when he was seriously considering his vocation. Though given to the world, as a matter of fact, in the form of a highly finished literary product, they represent, it must be believed, a genuine struggle on the part of the author to settle his career as a man-of-letters. Nature, and Man, and Art are looked at through the eyes of the man of joy, and then through the eyes of the man of seriousness; and though the events of his life marked out his career for him and shifted him to the character of *Il Penseroso* and robbed him for all time of the delicate fancy and feeling evidenced at the period of the composition of these companion poems, yet with a knowledge of his life and its environment we know the character of *L'Allegro* is there. Their closeness to the inner life of the author furnishes the cue for their full appreciation; and they can be realized richly in our lives only by being realized in relationship to the life of the author.

These familiar and more easily intelligible literary products, noted here only in the barest outline, serve but to suggest the rich list that might be used to enforce the point, that impressionistic standards of literary appreciation are unreliable; and that even with the trained reader there is the tendency to read himself into his literary preferences, in genuine Byronic fashion, rather than take his reading from the viewpoint of the author.

"The Buried Life" of literature is the thing that we most want to know, inasmuch as there is a subconscious realization that in that life there lies the secret to the highest type of literary appreciation. Great literary productions are those that have grown out of great spiritual crises; and the degree in which they are sincere and true to the soul-experiences through which the authors have passed they are great; but they must remain to us as a closed book unless we come into common possession of the production facts. The life incarnate in books can be revived only through a realization of the *one thing* the author has put in his masterpiece; and that realization can come alone through a knowledge of the facts and conditions that made the masterpiece a fact. Otherwise the reading is likely to be done, not in terms of life, but rather of art.

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