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ABSTRACT

A review of the problems encountered in studying literary texts focuses on the dangers of treating the text as a source of linguistic data rather than as a complete work in itself. Comments pertaining to the relationship of language and literature include discussion of teaching methods, literary criticism, background information, and literary traditions. (RL)

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The study of language and the study of literature

ROBERT COLEMAN

There are obviously many different ways of reading a literary text. We may take up a play of Shakespeare as a source of information about the English language in the late sixteenth century, as a document illustrating the material and moral culture of Elizabethan England, as evidence for the poet's own life and beliefs, and so on. All of these approaches are perfectly legitimate. But by treating the text as 'a source of data' they inevitably lead us away from it, to other documents – like the Book of Homilies or the Register of the Company of Stationers or whatever may be relevant to our inquiry. The play itself is then no longer the focal point of interest.

Yet it is with the play itself as a work of literature that we must first of all come to terms, whatever we wish to do with it subsequently; not only because it is the play's literary status, as a unique creative achievement of the human genius, that has established it as an integral part of our cultural tradition but also because any attempt to make use of it as a source of data will be falsified if we treat it as anything other than what it is. Shakespeare's language is not Elizabethan English; it is the language of a very particular Elizabethan, who was capable of exploiting and indeed extending in a very remarkable way the potentialities of the linguistic structure which he shared with his contemporaries. What the characters say and do on the stage is motivated not by any desire to reproduce just what the poet saw and heard around him but by the exigencies of the dramatic situations of plot and character as he conceived them, in the exposition of which his observations of contemporary life were but one ingredient. As for the man himself in

his plays, do we look for him in Hamlet, in Horatio, in Claudius, in the Gravedigger? Do we detect a note of more intense engagement where a character says something which seems to be inadequately motivated by the dramatic context? Or where certain themes, recurring in different plays and in the mouths of widely diverse characters, suggest an obsessive preoccupation on the poet's part? Or when he has introduced a new character into his sources, like Jacques or Touchstone in *As You Like It*? These are all possible lines of investigation for the determined biographer, but at every point we are brought back to the necessity of coming to terms with the play as a work of literature before we can proceed any further.

All this is even more to the point when we turn to a classical author. For, with the partial exception of the archaeologist, every specialist student of the Classics has to work with data that are mainly literary in form, and he who would 'study Greek and Roman civilization in all its aspects' must recognize the conditions that this imposes upon him.[1] To take a very straight-forward example, Thucydides and Tacitus are both major sources for the history of the periods they write about, but they are also two of the greatest literary artists of Classical Antiquity, and until we have come to terms with them as creative writers we cannot safely exploit their work as historical data.

Unlike the works of Shakespeare, classical literature has been the almost exclusive preserve of professional scholars for so long now that its importance as data has tended to obscure its appreciation as literature. In Homeric studies it is clearly right that some of us should be concerning ourselves with such questions as dialectal stratification, oral transmission and the historical and archaeological background of the epics, but these studies tend to lead us away from the poems themselves, and there is a real danger that the poetry may disappear behind the mass of scientific activity. Indeed one sometimes feels

[1] I am not concerned here with the many aspects of ancient civilization that are not touched at all by literature. It is salutary however to remind ourselves that the considerable data provided by inscriptions, non-literary papyri and material remains of various kinds, for all the exegetical skills lavished on them by the sciences and technologies of our subject, still leave large areas of that civilization in impenetrable obscurity.

envious of Dryden and Arnold, who did not have Schliemann, Milman Parry and the rest to distract them from what matters most of all, the two great masterpieces as they have in fact come down to us.

'The study of Greek and Roman civilization in all its aspects' is a stirring clarion call, but we must be careful about our responses to it. Somehow or other we need to find some middle course between two equally unpalatable extremes. On the one hand we have the exciting synthesis of the kind represented by books with titles like *The Greek View of Life*, which are so often little more than vague generalizations based on very whimsical criteria of significance, and would be more honestly recorded as *Mr X's View of the Greeks*. On the other hand there is the compilation of vast masses of amorphous information, such as one finds in the older Handbooks of Antiquities, which fail to cohere into a clear picture because they have *no* dominating criteria of significance, and fail to come to life because so much of the stuff has to be taken in at second hand and has little or no bearing on the one live contact that most students have with the classical world, namely the literature they actually read and the material art they see reproduced pictorially or displayed in museums. In a sense our present university courses do attempt to cover all aspects of the civilization, but the customary division into separate compartments–literature, art, philosophy, history and so on–avoids the extremes of chaos and vagueness at the expense of a clear view of that civilization as a whole. The absence of a focal point defeats the object of the entire programme.

Now it is my own belief that classical literature, studied as literature, must be that focal point, not only because it is our chief source of data, or because it is our major, in many cases our only, living contact with the Graeco-Roman world, but because of its inherent quality, which is after all the chief public justification we make for continuing to read it. No one can seriously maintain that a knowledge of fifth-century Athenian democracy throws any special light on the phenomena of modern democratic societies. The real reason for continuing to study it is that it is part of the social context and the cultural background of a great flowering of artistic and

philosophical creativity. To acquire an inwardness with this creative achievement through the study of the literature it has left behind can still be a worthwhile humane education, but the focal point must be the texts themselves and not merely manuals of literary history or books about the texts.

In fact the pedagogic procedures are the very reverse of the scholarly ones. Whereas the scholar works through the literature to the civilization in all its aspects, incorporating all the evidence from non-literary sources along the way, the student must take the conclusions of these investigations and with the aid of his teachers apply them to the texts he is reading. The study of classical civilization is for him ancillary to his reading. This is not a matter of 'judging a civilization only from its literature': judging a civilization is not our concern anyway, and few students in my experience need to be reminded that there were other Athenians beside Sophocles. But it does mean making an effort to place a tragedy of Sophocles in its historical and literary setting: being aware of the religious and poetical background of the genre, the conventions governing its form and subject matter, the conditions of Attic stage production and the rôle of the dramatic festivals in the life of the city, the attitudes of a fifth-century audience to the moral and theological issues implicit in the dramas—all of course within the limitations which the sources themselves place to our knowledge of such things. Or again when we are reading one of Cicero's speeches we must be able to set it in its historical context, in order to understand what the man is saying and to appreciate the relative strengths and weaknesses of his argument; we must be aware too of the ancient rhetorical tradition, the techniques of mounting and organizing a case, lawcourt procedure and so on.[2]

The importance of placing a work in this way applies no less to, say, Theocritus or Catullus than to Sophocles or Cicero. For no author writes in a vacuum, and the central tenet of some modern schools of criticism that 'a writer should put into his text all that is necessary for its elucidation' is demonstrably absurd. The very fact that he must use language as his

[2] Some of this is well illustrated in R. G. M. Nisbet's essay 'The Speeches' in *Cicero* (*Studies in Latin Literature and its Influence*) edited by T. A. Dorey.

creative medium entails the exploitation of patterns of meaning in vocabulary and grammar that have been established by others who have used the language before him, and if we are ignorant of these then we cannot even begin to understand what he is saying. Moreover the fact that he lives and writes at a particular time and place conditions his own attitudes and beliefs. In order to appreciate many of the differences between Senecan and Euripidean drama, for instance, we need to know a good deal about the respective cultural environments of the two dramatists. In fact every scrap of information that we can recover about the ancient world is potentially relevant to the literature it produced. The task of the scholar as critic and teacher is to sift out what is relevant in any given case: to focus the information available on the text which is there to be elucidated. Doughty's colleague[3] who spent so much time on astrology in the fourteenth century that he never got around to reading *The Franklyn's Tale* was at fault not for attending to astrology at all–for that needed attention, if certain details in the story were to come alive for his pupils–but for allowing the topic to assume irrelevant proportions, to become an end in itself, leading the pupils away from the text and thereby reducing it to the level of mere data. An incompetent teacher could easily have done the same with Doughty's own theme of conjugal love. The distinction is simply one of means and ends. A sense of proportion in the amount of erudition we need to apply to particular parts of a text as literature is one of the hardest lessons that we teachers have ourselves to learn. Too little leaves the author's work uncommunicated, too much just buries it.

Nor should we forget in our exploration of the background to a text the importance of the literary tradition to which it belongs; for a writer's experience of earlier literature is often as important as his experience of life in dictating the character of his work.[4] The technique of *imitatio* is something that we are confronted with very early in our commentaries on classical texts. We may be told for instance that this phrase or that

[3] *Didaskalos* II, (1966), 30.

[4] See, for example, Adam Parry's fine study 'Landscape in Greek Poetry' in *Yale Studies in classical Philology*, vol. 15 (1957).

motif, this simile or that image is borrowed from an earlier writer's work, and we need to be clear that this is not just a piece of plagiarism. The intention of the plagiarist is to pass off as his own something which he has merely stolen from someone else, while hoping desperately that his theft will pass unrecognized. *Imitatio* by contrast depends upon recognition. The writer who practises it as part of his own creative activity–whether it is Virgil or Eliot–relies upon his readers' familiarity with the original, in order to bring to his own work the associations which the borrowed material had in its former context. Like the use of language itself, which depends upon the ways that earlier speakers and writers in it have employed individual words and their patterns, *imitatio* is an integral part of the whole process of communication. By thus evoking complex associations that are never explicitly set forth a writer is able to achieve a density of texture in his own work which would otherwise be unattainable. For this reason we, his readers, have to go beyond the mere noting of such allusions and quotations to consider the original contexts from which they come, and try to determine why it is that the author has chosen this particular point in his text to practise the technique of *imitatio*. For the ancient reader, who was more familiar than most of us can ever be with the existing literary tradition, such overtones would be registered with unconscious spontaneity. We are compelled by our remoteness from the life of that tradition to reconstruct the process laboriously. We can seldom hope for the immediacy of response that a contemporary reader would have enjoyed, but at least we can strive towards the response itself. If we do not, then we are missing a whole area of the writer's meaning.

Another aspect of the literary tradition is the use of mythological *topoi*. The ancient myths and legends continued to be a vehicle of poetic thought long after the withdrawal of assent to any claim they might once have had to objective truth. For they still served as archetypes,[5] which enabled the indivi-

[5] One does not need to swallow fanciful theories about *The Collective Unconscious* to recognize that a great deal of what was enshrined in the cultural tradition, passed on from one generation to the next, acquired an archetypal significance through its powerful appeal to the imagination.

dual writer both to identify himself with his cultural past and also to generalize his own experience by associating it with recognized and emotionally defined patterns of human behaviour. The tradition itself is never of course a fixed and immutable one; Virgil's gods are not Homer's gods. But to see what concepts lie behind the divine machinery of the *Aeneid* and why it is at times embarrassingly unsuccessful we need not only to have read, say, the second book of the *De Natura Deorum* but to be aware of how potent the Homeric tradition still remained. It is wrong to dismiss mythology merely because we believe that we have understood what a poet is saying without reaching for a handbook. To assert that a class 'may be quite happy to be ignorant of who is who because they have moved on to grasp the sense of the poem without knowing' is to accuse the poet of ineptitude in introducing something that makes no contribution to the meaning and effectiveness of his poem.

Clearly, then, our background reading must include something of the literary tradition as well as the contemporary setting of each work. If our text is the *Georgics*, we need to look at Dio Cassius and Varro's *De Re Rustica*, and in addition at Hesiod, Aratus and Lucretius.[6] Some of our selections from these authors will, one hopes, be read in the original: but at least they should be studied in translation. Otherwise the poem will not be placed and Virgil's achievement not adequately assessed.

It is true that this kind of approach must in the early stages make for a very fragmented picture of classical civilization and the classical literary tradition. This need not trouble us overmuch; for who can lay his hand on his heart and claim that his own picture is not fragmented, even though some pieces may be larger than others? In any case this situation will only correspond to the fragmentary character of a student's actual reading. And it will have the positive advantage that what knowledge he has acquired of these matters will relate

[6] I assume that such reading will be accompanied by the study of secondary source material, such as is to be found in the relevant chapters of H. H. Scullard's *From the Gracchi to Nero* and H. J. Rose's *Handbook of Latin Literature*, which is in many ways the more valuable a work of scholarship precisely because its author was no literary critic.

directly to his own first-hand experience of the Classics. Of course the ultimate aim will be to reach a stage where more extensive reading has enabled him to comprehend at least certain periods of the Graeco-Roman world as unified wholes, with all the pieces more or less joined together and the focal points provided by the literature which he has read.[7] This may fall a long way short of 'Greek and Roman civilization in all its aspects', but it is ambitious enough.

Now if the study of literature as literature is to be the core of the classical curriculum, we need to give some thought to the way in which this study may in detail best be conducted. The task is not easy. It has often been remarked that we can develop a sensitive response to literature only in the context of our own language. For in our experience of English literature we are in contact with a tradition which is still alive to us and we have an immediate and spontaneous feeling for the creative use of language which we can never acquire so thoroughly in our experience of a foreign literature, much less an ancient one.[8] This is manifestly true, and most of us have been aware in teaching pupils who have read English to an advanced level or at any rate have a wide familiarity with English literature just how much this can contribute to their reading of the Greek and Latin Classics. They may need to acquire certain essential techniques of scholarship; they rarely need to be taught a critical method.

Nevertheless the relative disadvantage under which any modern reader is placed in his study of the Classics can be turned to some positive value. Thus the very fact that a great part of the whole mechanism of communication is immediately familiar to us in English literature can sometimes be a barrier to careful reading. We register so much at an unconscious level that we often fail to explore the resources of expression and organization that the author confronts us with. Or again, more specifically, if we are reading a sixteenth-century text, so

[7] I am thinking here of something analogous to the scheme for seventeenth-century English studies expounded in F. R. Leavis's book, *Education and the University*, ch. 2.

[8] This point is well made and exploited in an interesting way in A. G. Lee's 'Tenerorum lusor amorum' (*Critical Essays in Roman Literature: Elegy and Lyric*, edited by J. P. Sullivan).

much is still linguistically live for us that we pass over what is not, failing to take account of such elementary facts as the changes in meaning that many words have undergone in the intervening centuries. In a dead language dangers of this sort are minimized. For while we cannot, as has already been emphasized, enjoy the immediate and spontaneous response to a passage that the Greek or Latin author could assume in his contemporaries and on which the effectiveness of his words to some extent depended, the laborious and painstaking process by which we have to uncover the meaning can make us more aware of the complexity of what is on the page before us.

What we are after is a method of recreating a literary work by sensitive and careful attention to the interpretation of its detailed parts, in order that we may arrive eventually at a total response to the piece as an organic whole. In so doing we must, I think, accept the values implicit in it before we detach ourselves and assess its effectiveness in the wider context of our own experience of life and literature. In practice of course the latter comes first, but I am concerned here with systematic analysis of the work and our response to it, not with the natural order of our reactions. It is obvious that the work we recreate cannot be exactly the work the writer himself first conceived, any more than a violinist's realization of the notes on the page before him can be the same partita that Bach heard in his mind's ear when he first wrote them down. But it is still our duty to the writer, in the first instance, to approach his work with conscientious humility and at least endeavour to comprehend and assess it in its own terms.

In one important sense this duty is compelled on us more patently in literature than in music, since the very fact that literature communicates through the organization of linguistic patterns makes it necessary for us to master as far as we can the lexicon and grammar that a writer has used before we can begin to read at all.

Both Kenney and Quinn[9] have rightly insisted on the fundamental necessity of linguistic accuracy. Nothing can bring the study of literature into greater and more deserved

[9] *Didaskalos* I, 2 (1964), 4ff., and II, 1 (1966), 17ff.

disrepute than the notion that all we need is 'to gather the general sense of a passage' or that 'speed is as important as accuracy'. The desire to break away from careful reading usually goes with the more praiseworthy one that our students should read more widely than the present system of set books encourages them to do. All of us want them to read as widely as possible, but not at the expense of depth. A person who has really got to grips with a single play of Sophocles or a handful of Horace's Odes has gained far more from his classical reading than one who has rattled on through the entire *œuvre* of these authors, just getting the general sense of what he is reading. The trouble here is not that set books encourage close study, but rather that they too often encourage the wrong kind of close study. There is no substitute for that accuracy of reading that comes from a secure grasp of the language of a passage and a scrupulous attention to detail; and our study of literature must be based on a thorough grounding in all the linguistic phenomena that make up the medium of literary communication.

No doubt there will be objections that this emphasis on language—on grammar, lexicon and the figures of rhetorical and poetical discourse—sounds much too like the old-fashioned philology from whose clutches we were hoping to escape. But there is again the distinction of means and ends. These linguistic studies can contribute to a truly literary approach to literature, if and only if they are constantly directed to the total comprehension of the text itself and do not lead us away from it.[10] Indeed it is only through the scrupulous attention to detail that I have tried to emphasize here that we can properly recreate a total work and comprehend it as a whole. Our exploration of every part must lead us to a realization of its organic relation to the whole, just as our possession of the whole must make us sensitive to the details that contribute to it.[11] And above all at every stage of analysis intellectual

[10] See for instance the way in which K. F. Quinn incorporates his discussion of Horatian word order into the total literary analysis of an ode in 'Horace as a Love Poet: A Reading of Odes 1.5', in *Arion*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1963).

[11] An admirable example of this to and fro movement between whole and part is provided by many of Steele Commager's discussions of particular poems in his book, *The Odes of Horace: A Critical Study*.

apperception needs to be enlivened, as Quinn so rightly stressed,[12] by a full response of the reader's whole personality. For the possession of a classical text is not merely a matter of intellectual understanding in terms of acquired linguistic or philological techniques.

Now it is this possession of a text that is the essential part of literary criticism. Evaluation is only secondary. This is not just because so many disputes about assessment in fact turn on points of interpretation ('But see here, you've misunderstood what Ovid is saying in this line' or 'I don't think you are fully aware of the significance of Euripides' use of this particular image'). It is because assessment is not the chief object of our study of literature. We do not read literary works simply in order to place them in a class-list, awarding an alpha here, a gamma minus there: we read them in order to extend and enrich our experience as human beings; and to acquire a real inwardness with the work of even a minor poet, to share in his creative experience as we read his work, is still for most of us something valuable and rewarding.

The 'Common pursuit of true judgement' may originally have been salutary in directing people away from the belief that literature is a *divertissement* and literary criticism a species of belles-lettres, but in some ways it has been a bane to modern critical thinking. For it has encouraged the class-list approach to literature and a conception of the critic as one whose task it is to bestow fastidious praise and pronounce sentences of excommunication. Moreover, behind the epithet 'true' there seems to lurk a fundamental confusion about what assessment entails; for it presupposes an objectivity which in the nature of the activity cannot possibly apply. The calculus of literary values is an arbitrary one at all times, reflecting the dominant preoccupations of the age in which the critic lives and the conceptual framework that characterizes his own culture. In recognizing that there can be no absolute finality we need not, however, go to the opposite extreme and seek refuge in the comfortable doctrine *de gustibus*, which often conceals a total abdication from critical judgement. Of course we all of us find ourselves making value judgements on what we read, and these

[12] *Didaskalos* II, 1 (1966), 22.

are bound to emerge from our responses to particular works of literature. There is certainly no place for that peculiar form of incense-burning that makes so much that passes for criticism of classical literature unbearably stuffy to the outsider. But when we register a writer's failures as well as his successes, we dare not forget that the criteria we are employing are not those of every age and that the work in question may have evoked a quite different appraisal within the calculus of values that were accepted at the time it was written. We are not bound by the values of another age any more than we are bound to comprehend the work exclusively in the author's terms, but I believe we must take account of them before we pass our own judgement. Here Kenney was surely right[13] to insist on sympathy as a necessary ingredient in our approach to literature. For without it literary criticism can only become an austere and joyless inquisition, founded upon criteria which are none the less arbitrary for being enunciated with pentecostal dogmatism. And this is as fatal to human studies as the old ruthless Wissenschaft or the woolly 'aesthetic' criticism that so often, ironically, accompanied it.

In castigating the 'aesthetic' approach with its 'language of elevated sentiment in which all detail has become vague and shadowy' Doughty[14] tactfully refrained from citing any examples. An insider need feel no such constraint; and I offer this as perhaps the kind of thing he was protesting against:

> But the specific and central charm of Virgil lies deeper than in any merely technical quality. The word which expresses it most nearly is that of pity. In the most famous of his single lines he speaks of the 'tears of things,' just this sense of tears, this voice that always, in its most sustained splendour and in its most ordinary cadences, vibrates with a strange pathos, is what finally places him alone among artists. This thrill in the voice, *come colui che piange e dice*, is never absent from his poetry. In the 'lonely words,' in the 'pathetic half-lines' spoken of by the two great modern masters of English prose and verse, he perpetually touches the deepest springs of feeling; in these it is that he sounds, as no other poet has done, the depths of beauty and sorrow, of patience and magnanimity, of honour in life and hope beyond death.

The author of this was certainly not an incompetent scholar, nor was he insensitive to literature. His edition of *Aeneid* reveals a deep familiarity with the poetry and contains many illumi-

[13] *Didaskalos* I, 2 (1964), 5.

[14] *Didaskalos* II, 1 (1966), 28.

nating critical comments on particular passages and specific aspects of Virgil's work. What has gone wrong here is that, when he comes to generalities, all disciplined precision has somehow forsaken him. It is not even that what he says strikes us as unacceptable—indeed in several places one feels a vague wish to assent. But it can only be a vague wish, because the whole exposition is couched in a language too emotive and slippery to permit one to see clearly what one is being invited to assent to. The tone is comparable, almost, to that of a religious mystic; for it is as if he were saying, 'if your response to Virgil's poetry is not like my own, then I cannot communicate with you'. Mackail has in fact told us far more here about the relationship that he himself feels to the poet than about the poetry itself. All criticism must of course embody some element of autobiography, or the words on the page have not really come to life for the critic, however fully he may have grasped them in an intellectual sense. But the trouble here is that the generalities are not related specifically to the details of the poetry, to the extent that, equipped with them, we can go to this or that passage and find illumination where there was obscurity before.

The to and fro movement between close analysis of detail and discussion of the total work can, I believe, save us from falling into Mackail's error. It provides us with a rigorous method of exploring the basis of our responses and of the critical evaluations that arise from them.[15] For we are thus enabled constantly to check and revise our first responses. Closer analysis may reveal things that on previous readings we had missed or only grasped imperfectly: an image may turn out to have more significance than we had at first realized,[16] or we may find an impressive metaphor to be less functional in its context than we had realized when we were momentarily dazzled by its brilliance.

Furthermore the to and fro movement is useful, indeed indispensable, for the fruitful interchange of ideas among

[15] A brief but effective demonstration of the way in which the character of a poem is revealed in its detail can be found in F. R. Leavis's discussion of Matthew Arnold's sonnet 'To Shakespeare' in *Education and the University*, pp. 73-8. This is incidentally one of the few explicit instances of analysis in Leavis's actual writings.

different readers of a text. Instead of the take-it-or-leave-it assessment of a work we have a means of expounding not only our general conclusions but the particular observations which have led us to them. When we are asked to assent to a critical judgement, we can see exactly what we are being invited to assent to, what the judgement entails in terms of precise responses to particular details: and where we cannot agree, we can see what the points of dispute are in the words on the page in front of us.

This habit of accurate and sensitive reading, once acquired, will, I believe, not only enable us to enrich our study of classical literature as literature and make of it a truly focal point for all our other classical studies; it will also ensure that we shall be in a position to avoid some of the hazards that lie in wait for us whenever we turn aside to employ these same texts as data for our specialist interests in history or philosophy.

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[16] Just how much a close detailed attention to repeated patterns of imagery can contribute to a more secure grasp of the organic character of a whole play is well brought out by C. P. Segal, 'The Tragedy of the Hippolytus: The Waters of Ocean and the Untouched Meadow' in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* vol. 70 (1965).