

## CHAPTER IV

### *Literary Theory, Criticism, and History*

As we have envisaged a rationale for the study of literature, we must conclude the possibility of a systematic and integrated study of literature. English affords no very satisfactory name for this. The most common terms for it are "literary scholarship" and "philology." The former term is objectionable only because it seems to exclude "criticism" and to stress the academic nature of the study; it is acceptable, doubtless, if one interprets the term "scholar" as inclusively as did Emerson. The latter term, "philology," is open to many misunderstandings. Historically, it has been used to include not only all literary and linguistic studies but studies of all products of the human mind. Though its greatest vogue was in nineteenth-century Germany, it still survives in the titles of such reviews as *Modern Philology*, *Philological Quarterly*, and *Studies in Philology*. Boekh, who wrote a fundamental *Encyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften* (1877, but based on lectures partly dating back to 1809),<sup>1</sup> defined "philology" as the "knowledge of the known" and hence the study of language and literatures, arts and politics, religion and social customs. Practically identical with Greenlaw's "literary history," Boekh's philology is obviously motivated by the needs of classical studies, for which the help of history and archaeology seems particularly necessary. With Boekh, literary study is only one branch of philology, understood as a total science of civilization, particularly a science of what he, with German Romanticism, called the "National Spirit." Today, because of its etymology and much of the actual work of specialists, philology is frequently understood to mean linguistics, especially historical grammar and the study of past forms of languages. Since the term has so many and such divergent meanings, it is best to abandon it.

Another alternative term for the work of the literary scholar

is "research." But this seems particularly unfortunate, for it stresses the merely preliminary search for materials and draws, or seems to draw, an untenable distinction between materials which have to be "searched for" and those which are easily available. For example, it is "research" when one visits the British Museum to read a rare book, while it apparently involves a different mental process to sit at home in an armchair and read a reprint of the same book. At most, the term "research" suggests certain preliminary operations, the extent and nature of which will vary greatly with the nature of the problem. But it ill suggests those subtle concerns with interpretation, characterization, and evaluation which are peculiarly characteristic of literary studies.

Within our "proper study," the distinctions between literary theory, criticism, and history are clearly the most important. There is, first, the distinction between a view of literature as a simultaneous order and a view of literature which sees it primarily as a series of works arranged in a chronological order and as integral parts of the historical process. There is, then, the further distinction between the study of the principles and criteria of literature and the study of the concrete literary works of art, whether we study them in isolation or in a chronological series. It seems best to draw attention to these distinctions by describing as "literary theory" the study of the principles of literature, its categories, criteria, and the like, and by differentiating studies of concrete works of art as either "literary criticism" (primarily static in approach) or "literary history." Of course, "literary criticism" is frequently used in such a way as to include all literary theory; but such usage ignores a useful distinction. Aristotle was a theorist; Sainte-Beuve, primarily a critic. Kenneth Burke is largely a literary theorist, while R. P. Blackmur is a literary critic. The term "theory of literature" might well include—as this book does—the necessary "theory of literary criticism" and "theory of literary history."

These distinctions are fairly obvious and rather widely accepted. But less common is a realization that the methods so designated cannot be used in isolation, that they implicate each other so thoroughly as to make inconceivable literary theory without criticism or history, or criticism without theory and his-

tory, or history without theory and criticism. Obviously, literary theory is impossible except on the basis of a study of concrete literary works. Criteria, categories, and schemes cannot be arrived at *in vacuo*. But, conversely, no criticism or history is possible without some set of questions, some system of concepts, some points of reference, some generalizations. There is here, of course, no unsurmountable dilemma: we always read with some preconceptions, and we always change and modify these preconceptions upon further experience of literary works. The process is dialectical: a mutual interpenetration of theory and practice.

There have been attempts to isolate literary history from theory and criticism. For example, F. W. Bateson<sup>2</sup> argued that literary history shows A to derive from B, while criticism pronounces A to be better than B. The first type, according to this view, deals with verifiable facts; the second, with matters of opinion and faith. But this distinction is quite untenable. There are simply no data in literary history which are completely neutral "facts." Value judgments are implied in the very choice of materials: in the simple preliminary distinction between books and literature, in the mere allocation of space to this or that author. Even the ascertaining of a date or a title presupposes some kind of judgment, one which selects this particular book or event from the millions of other books and events. Even if we grant that there are facts comparatively neutral, facts such as dates, titles, biographical events, we merely grant the possibility of compiling the annals of literature. But any question a little more advanced, even a question of textual criticism or of sources and influences, requires constant acts of judgment. Such a statement, for example, as "Pope derives from Dryden" not only presupposes the act of selecting Dryden and Pope out of the innumerable versifiers of their times, but requires a knowledge of the characteristics of Dryden and Pope and then a constant activity of weighing, comparing, and selecting which is essentially critical. The question of the collaboration of Beaumont and Fletcher is insoluble unless we accept such an important principle as that certain stylistic traits (or devices) are related to one rather than to the other of the two writers; other-

wise we have to accept the stylistic differences merely as matter of fact.

But usually the case for the isolation of literary history from literary criticism is put on different grounds. It is not denied that acts of judgment are necessary, but it is argued that literary history has its own peculiar standards and criteria, i.e., those of the other ages. We must, these literary reconstructionists argue, enter into the mind and attitudes of past periods and accept their standards, deliberately excluding the intrusions of our own preconceptions. This view, called "historicism," was elaborated consistently in Germany during the nineteenth century, though even there it has been criticized by historical theorists of such eminence as Ernst Troeltsch.<sup>3</sup> It seems now to have penetrated directly or indirectly into the United States, and to it many of our "literary historians" more or less clearly profess allegiance. Hardin Craig, for instance, said that the newest and best phase of recent scholarship is the "avoidance of anachronistic thinking."<sup>4</sup> E. E. Stoll, studying the conventions of the Elizabethan stage and the expectations of its audience, works on the theory that the reconstruction of the author's intention is the central purpose of literary history.<sup>5</sup> Some such theory is implied in the many attempts to study Elizabethan psychological theories, such as the doctrine of humors, or of the scientific or pseudo-scientific conceptions of poets.<sup>6</sup> Rosemond Tuve has tried to explain the origin and meaning of metaphysical imagery by reference to the training in Ramist logic received by Donne and his contemporaries.<sup>7</sup>

As such studies cannot but convince us that different periods have entertained different critical conceptions and conventions, it has been concluded that each age is a self-contained unity expressed through its own type of poetry, incommensurate with any other. This view has been candidly and persuasively expounded by Frederick A. Pottle in his *Idiom of Poetry*.<sup>8</sup> He calls his position that of "critical relativism," and speaks of profound "shifts of sensibility," of a "total discontinuity" in the history of poetry. His exposition is the more valuable as he combines it with an acceptance of absolute standards in ethics and religion.

At its finest, this conception of "literary history" requires an

effort of imagination, of "empathy," of deep congeniality with a past age or a vanished taste. Successful efforts have been made to reconstruct the general outlook in life, the attitudes, conceptions, prejudices, and underlying assumptions of many civilizations. We know a great deal about the Greek attitude toward the gods, women, and slaves; we can describe the cosmology of the Middle Ages in great detail; and we have attempts to show the very different manner of seeing, or at least the very different artistic traditions and conventions, implied by Byzantine and Chinese art. Especially in Germany there is a plethora of studies, many of them influenced by Spengler, on the Gothic man, the Baroque man—all supposed to be sharply set off from our time, living in a world of their own.

In the study of literature, this attempt at historical reconstruction has led to great stress on the intention of the author, which, it is assumed, can be studied in the history of criticism and literary taste. It is usually assumed that if we can ascertain this intention and can see that the author has fulfilled it, we can also dispose of the problem of criticism. The author has served a contemporary purpose, and there is no need or even possibility of further criticizing his work. The method thus leads to the recognition of a single critical standard, that of contemporary success. There are then not only one or two but literally hundreds of independent, diverse, and mutually exclusive conceptions of literature, each of which is in some way "right." The ideal of poetry is broken up in so many splinters that nothing remains of it: a general anarchy or, rather, a leveling of all values must be the result. The history of literature is reduced to a series of discrete and hence finally incomprehensible fragments. The extreme form of this historicism is the Chicago Neo-Aristotelianism, which, denying the possibility of a general theory of literature, leaves us with unique and thus incommensurate and equal works.<sup>9</sup> The recommended rhetorical analysis can be carried out indifferently with the *Divine Comedy* or the trashiest detective novel. A more moderate form is the view that there are polar poetical ideals which are so different that there is no common denominator between them: Classicism and Romanticism, the ideal of Pope and of Wordsworth, the poetry of statement and the poetry of implication.

The whole idea that the "intention" of the author is the proper subject of literary history seems, however, quite mistaken. The meaning of a work of art is not exhausted by, or even equivalent to, its intention. As a system of values, it leads an independent life. The total meaning of a work of art cannot be defined merely in terms of its meaning for the author and his contemporaries. It is rather the result of a process of accretion, i.e., the history of its criticism by its many readers in many ages. It seems unnecessary and actually impossible to declare, as the historical reconstructionists do, that this whole process is irrelevant and that we must return only to its beginning. It is simply not possible to stop being men of the twentieth century while we engage in a judgment of the past: we cannot forget the associations of our own language, the newly acquired attitudes, the impact and import of the last centuries. We cannot become contemporary readers of Homer or Chaucer or members of the audience of the theater of Dionysus in Athens or of the Globe in London. There will always be a decisive difference between an act of imaginative reconstruction and actual participation in a past point of view. We cannot really believe in Dionysus and laugh at him at the same time, as the audience of Euripides' *Bacchae* seem to have done; <sup>10</sup> and few of us can accept Dante's circles of Hell and mountain of Purgatory as literal truth. If we should really be able to reconstruct the meaning which *Hamlet* held for its contemporary audience, we would merely impoverish it. We would suppress the legitimate meanings which later generations found in *Hamlet*. We would bar the possibility of a new interpretation. This is not a plea for arbitrary subjective misreadings: the problem of a distinction between "correct" and wrong-headed readings will remain, and will need a solution in every specific case. The historical scholar will not be satisfied to judge a work of art merely from the point of view of our own time—a privilege of the practicing critic, who will reevaluate the past in terms of the needs of a present-day style or movement. It may be even instructive for him to look at a work of art from the point of view of a third time, contemporaneous neither with him nor with the author, or to survey the whole history of the interpretation and criticism of a work which will serve as a guide to the total meaning.

In practice, such clear-cut choices between the historical and the present-day point of view are scarcely feasible. We must beware of both false relativism and false absolutism. Values grow out of the historical process of valuation, which they in turn help us to understand. The answer to historical relativism is not a doctrinaire absolutism which appeals to "unchanging human nature" or the "universality of art." We must rather adopt a view for which the term "Perspectivism" seems suitable. We must be able to refer a work of art to the values of its own time and of all the periods subsequent to its own. A work of art is both "eternal" (i.e., preserves a certain identity) and "historical" (i.e., passes through a process of traceable development). Relativism reduces the history of literature to a series of discrete and hence discontinuous fragments, while most absolutisms serve either only a passing present-day situation or are based (like the standards of the New Humanists, the Marxists, and the Neo-Thomists) on some abstract non-literary ideal unjust to the historical variety of literature. "Perspectivism" means that we recognize that there is one poetry, one literature, comparable in all ages, developing, changing, full of possibilities. Literature is neither a series of unique works with nothing in common nor a series of works enclosed in time-cycles of Romanticism or Classicism, the age of Pope and the age of Wordsworth. Nor is it, of course, the "block-universe" of sameness and immutability which an older Classicism conceived as ideal. Both absolutism and relativism are false; but the more insidious danger today, at least in the United States, is a relativism equivalent to an anarchy of values, a surrender of the task of criticism.

In practice, no literary history has ever been written without some principles of selection and some attempt at characterization and evaluation. Literary historians who deny the importance of criticism are themselves unconscious critics, usually derivative critics, who have merely taken over traditional standards and reputations. Usually, today, they are belated Romanticists who have closed their minds to all other types of art and especially to modern literature. But, as R. G. Collingwood has said very pertinently, a man "who claims to know what makes Shakespeare a poet is tacitly claiming to know whether Miss Stein is a poet, and if not, why not."<sup>11</sup>

The exclusion of recent literature from serious study has been an especially bad consequence of this "scholarly" attitude. The term "modern" literature used to be interpreted so widely by academics that scarcely any work after Milton's was considered a quite respectable object of study. Since then, the eighteenth century has been accepted into good and regular standing as conventional literary history and has even become fashionable, since it appears to offer an escape into a more gracious, more stable, and more hierarchic world. The Romantic period and the later nineteenth century are also beginning to receive the attention of the scholars, and there are even a few hardy men in academic positions who defend and practice the scholarly study of contemporary literature.

The only possible argument against the study of living authors is the point that the student foregoes the perspective of the completed work, of the explication which later works may give to the implications of the earlier. But this disadvantage, valid only for developing authors, seems small compared to the advantages we have in knowing the setting and the time and in the opportunities for personal acquaintance and interrogation or at least correspondence. If many second- or even tenth-rate authors of the past are worth study, a first- or even second-rate author of our time is worth studying, too. It is usually lack of perception or timidity which makes academics reluctant to judge for themselves. They profess to await the "verdict of the ages," not realizing that this is but the verdict of other critics and readers, including other professors. The whole supposed immunity of the literary historian to criticism and theory is thoroughly false, and that for a simple reason: every work of art is existing now, is directly accessible to observation, and is a solution of certain artistic problems whether it was composed yesterday or a thousand years ago. It cannot be analyzed, characterized, or evaluated without a constant recourse to critical principles. "The literary historian must be a critic even in order to be an historian."<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, literary history is also highly important for literary criticism as soon as the latter goes beyond the most subjective pronouncement of likes and dislikes. A critic who is content to be ignorant of all historical relationships would con-



stantly go astray in his judgments. He could not know which work is original and which derivative; and, through his ignorance of historical conditions, he would constantly blunder in his understanding of specific works of art. The critic possessed of little or no history is inclined to make slipshod guesses, or to indulge in autobiographical "adventures among masterpieces," and, on the whole, will avoid concern with the more remote past, content to hand that over to the antiquarian and the "philologist."

A case in point is medieval literature, especially English medieval literature, which—with the possible exception of Chaucer—has scarcely been approached from any aesthetic and critical point of view. The application of modern sensibility would give a different perspective to much Anglo-Saxon poetry or to the rich medieval lyric, just as, conversely, an introduction of historical points of view and a systematic examination of genetic problems could throw much light on contemporary literature. The common divorce between literary criticism and literary history has been detrimental to both.<sup>13</sup>