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Principles in Literary Criticism

By Frances M. Perry.

That quality, by virtue of which a work of literature becomes a classic, by which it is rendered more beautiful with increased familiarity, because of which it lives and is read, approved, admired, emulated by succeeding generations; readily makes itself felt to the scholar, but is so subtle, so intangible as to evade definition. However the critics have discovered from the study of the classics many laws,
which will help the untrained, uncrit-
ical reader to a recognition and an
appreciation of true artistic beauty
in literature; and will guide the
aspiring writer, giving him a knowl-
edge of the tactile necessities to high
art, and teaching him to avoid what
is incompatible with it.

"The place of books in public
estimation is fixed not by what is
written about them but by what is
written in them"—no man was ever
written down but by himself." The
Critic is not an arbitrary judge. His function is not to make laws and standards of judgement but to reveal them as he discovers them from the masterpieces, and to initiate the literary amateur into the esoteric school of literature, to teach him to write with better form, to look into the soul of what he reads, and to comprehend its beauty of thought and expression.

Matthew Arnold warns readers against two estimates of literature
which are false from a literary standpoint: The historical estimate, or the valuation of a book in consideration of the time in which it was written; and the personal estimate, or the valuation of a work in accordance with the reader's untrained taste. Opposed to these is the "real estimate", according to the intrinsic merit of the work. This is the only true estimate and the only one with which the critic is concerned.
To reach the real estimate, those qualifications are necessary which distinguish the critic from the ordinary reader. Thorough scholarship is requisite. The trained, analytical mind, which never so loses itself in the enjoyment of literature as to become unconscious of the means by which the pleasing effect is produced, or forgetful of the mechanism of the work, is peculiar to the scholar and
essential to the critic. He must possess liberality, sympathy and independence, a broad, appreciative mind, which recognizes merit in varied garb, is accessible to new ideas and interests, and independent of its own inclinations and prejudices. The critic should be entirely independent of authorship in judging the intrinsic merit of a book. For while such study of the author's life and character as has been advised by many o
the best critics, among them, Feine, St. Beuve, and Minto, is wholly legitimate; the limit lies at that point where the consideration of the author ceases to be an aid in the interpretations of his works. The critic who allows himself to be influenced for or against a work because of any feeling for its author, who excuses bad writing for its author's sake or slights good writing because its author is
Unknown, unpopular or has written poorly, has wandered from the real estimate. Correct interpretation is also indispensable. "It is a rarer gift than might be supposed to be able to read a book without reading oneself into it."

Possessed of all these qualifications, it is only by persevering and painstaking study that the critic arrives at the real estimate of a work. His attention is divided by substance and style; style in
The sense of general treatment of the subject, and in the restricted sense of style with regard to peculiarities of expression.

The importance of style is usually admitted and matter and manner both, are required to be of the highest order; but the importance of substance has been exalted by some at the expense of manner. M. Renan holds that truth is the only essential to good literature and that
literary skill is valueless. This is partly true. While a genius writes without conscious art or skill it is by virtue of his intuitive skill that he is a genius. Then too, it is often true that, "words not unwillingly will follow provided matter," and an uneducated man finds clear expression for a truth thought which possesses him, as in the case of the illiterate Russian peasant Bondareff, who wrote that remarkable book on "Labor" which
made a manual laborer of Count Tolstoi. But we can conceive that many men lacking skill of expression, both natural and acquired, may have a great deep truth within while as to reaching it they are much in the condition of Chaucer's "dronke man Who wol wel he hath an hous But he not which the right way is thider."

Truth of thought is indispensable to the highest kind of literature and if the thought be beautiful the language which clearly
expresses it must be beautiful. But it is through literary skill that perfect clearness of expression is attained and though truth is the only essential to good literature, literary skill is not valueless for literary skill, either conscious or unconscious, is necessary to the expression of truth. Truth in literature supposes skill. The author must know the laws of composition, just as the artist must be acquainted with the
technique of his art, before he can paint a true representation of life.

For the determination of the worth of the subject of a literary production the critic would do well to adopt M. Taine's criterion: "The aim of a work of art is to give full prominence to the leading character, and its position in literature will depend upon the importance and beneficence of the character." By an
"important" character, he means one that is not an artificial being of some particular time or culture, but a stable, primitive, universal invariable type. Upon the character’s importance depends its appreciation by readers of different ages. The "beneficence" of a character depends upon its perfect proportion, and the harmonious development of both reflective and executive powers, and especially upon
a disposition which makes the character a benefit to its community.

The subject having been found to be suitable for a work of high art, to be both "important" and "beneficial"; the next step in criticism is the discovery of that principle which should regulate the treatment of the subject, the keynote to which the whole work is attuned, the work's raison d'être, the idea which the subject is posed to express, and to whose
Emphasis every part of the work should contribute. It is the life-giving principle, the cell-gemmule, which controls the form and shape of the work it germinates. Whatever is inconsistent or at variance with its development may be justly stigmatized by the critic as superfluous. In the criticism of fiction especially, it should be remembered that it is this principle rather than the plot which governs the construction of
of the novel, and that which does not tend towards the development of the story, is admissible, if only it is in harmony with the development of the purpose. The plot is subservient to the purpose, being simply the ordering of material, and the exposition of the subject in such a way as to set forth the purpose. This principle must like the subject be tried as to its importance and beneficence.
And must possess these qualifications if the writing it has generated belongs to classical literature.

Given, an important and beneficent subject, and an important and beneficent or moral purpose. What is the spirit of their treatment? How does the writer regard life? As a joke, as a diversion, or as a serious matter? Treatment of the truth he has chosen to interpret or expound from the first point of view,
Secures laughter, the second. amusement, the third alone.
Appeals to the best in the reader.
A work is truly great only when
The truth it teaches is presented
With the utmost earnestness
And seriousness.

The subject must be treated truthfully, with originality, with power, and with finish and completeness.

A worthy subject can stand truthful presentation.
A work, which is a just interpretation of life, which pictures life truly, or illustrates accurately some principle which life teaches, is of greater value than the one which is not a picture nor interpretation of life, but of what some man has persuaded himself is or should be life; the work of a man who can not see beauty in truth, but would have what he conceives to be
beautiful true- who has not learned "life is your master; and your understanding but the servant thereof. It is a divine life- with divine laws, a divine type a divine meaning- though ye call it yours; and ye can not escape its mastery; but is ever putting his understanding above life. The mind furnished with a true picture of life, finds in it innumerable beauties and benefits as it grasps it
the ideas comprehended in
the picture. The artificial
picture thrusts upon the mind
the author's idealized idea
which may please for a time
but soon becomes tiresome and
ridiculous. It is for this
reason that such a poem as "michael"
is infinitely superior to the "mand muller" class
of poems. It is doubtful
whether any subject or
question of human interest,
Truthfully and realistically treated has not some degree of beneficence. It is said to be no wrong for literature to picture vice so long as it does not teach it. The more nearly life is reproduced the less is the danger of teaching vice. That idealized horror is less malignant than real horror is a mistaken idea. Gola's disgusting and loathsome
picture of the corps of-nana.
the once beautiful and ra-
dient "Venus", which brands
the readers mind with a
realization of the vanity
and frailty of merely physical
beauty, is as deserving of a
place in literature as the
monster Milton painted as
the guardian of Hell's gate.
A great subject is not degraded
by close scrutiny. While the
trifling must be subordinated.
to the important; elaboration of
detail is not a fault. There
is little room for impressionist
work in literature.

As long as nature is
the writer's model there is
no danger of a charge of
lack of originality being
brought against him. If he is
one of those people who either
can not or will not see things
as they are, his case is hopeless
no matter how fully convinced.
he may be that he is justly interpreting nature; for the distorted object one perceives through a flawed glass manifests the flaw more clearly than the object. Originality will not redeem a crank for with him it becomes peculiarity and mannerism, which are condemnable. The originality to be desired is simply that individuality which a normal minded man gives his
works, who writes irrespectively of the opinions of others, from a sincere conviction of the truth of what he writes. Even though his idea may have been influenced or suggested by another, it is his own if he feels its truth, understands it, and believes it independently of his authority. And the work which contains the honest expression of that idea which has become his, may be qualified...
as original. A writing which lacks originality and is simply a copy or imitation may be a very excellent piece of work, just as the copy of a painting may possess great merit, but that which is insincere and superficial can not be great. The copy must lack the very quality which makes its pattern great, for the spirit which animated the original is wanting. Substance having been
Considered, and the spirit of its treatment, there remains for the critics inspection the manner of expression and the form.

However natural and unlabored a work may seem, if it is a meritorious work, it will be found upon examination to conform to certain rules of composition, and to have been written in accordance with some plan or system. It is impossible to record
all on any extensive subject, and it is a matter of great moment that what is selected be necessary to the purpose, which must be ascertained before any judgment of the unity can be formed. If there is any portion of the composition which does not bear upon the question or theme under discussion, no matter how meritorious the digression may be in itself, it detracts from the unity of the
Whole and so lowers its artistic value. No side issue, be it ever so instructive and inspiring can be introduced without diminishing the interest and force of the main issue. Nothing should be admitted wholly for its own sake, but should be necessary to the perfection of the whole. Nor can one idea be repeatedly presented with only a difference in the expression without producing an offensive monotony.
Every part of a masterpiece should be so indispensable that its absence would cause a perceptible vacancy and make the work manifestly imperfect.

The arrangement of the material to the best advantage necessitates such a succession and ordering of matter as will secure increased interest and strength, so that the height may be reached by a continued ascent, and having been reached it...
will command a clear view of the road traveled, so that one completing the work, may have a comprehensive idea of the whole, and by analysis may see the stages of his progress and their relations to one another, the subordinate, subordinated, and the important given due prominence and the purpose given the greatest possible development.

While ideas may with all propriety be too abstruse and
complex for immediate comprehension, their expression must be perfectly clear. The most important measure towards the accomplishment of clear expression is the accurate use of words. Almost every word has a peculiar shade of meaning which no other word can express. Words should be so used that their nice meanings may not be blunted but may be clearly defined. If in choosing between the repetition of a word, to re-express an idea.
and the use of a word of a slightly different meaning, the writer chooses inaccuracy to repetition he does an injury to the language in thus helping to destroy nice distinctions. He who sacrifices clearness to music or elegance does the same wrong. High and enduring beauty lies in the thought and words are beautiful as they are identical with the idea. The invention of a word that has no equivalent and is needed is a valuable
addition to a language. Without an exact terminology, perspicuity and conciseness are impossible.

Euphistic, flowery speech whose highest purpose is ornamentation is offensive to good taste; but figurative or elegant writing which illustrates, explains or emphasizes the thought, or discloses its beauty, is a necessary part of literature.

"Expression is the dress of thought and still appears more decent as more suitable."

In addition to the exact suit. 
of words to ideas in sense, words are sometimes effectively used whose sound suggests the meaning for example, those mystical lines from the "Hymn of the Nativity":

The winds with wonder whist,

Smoothly the waters kiss.

And the swinecry: "Kissed with cancerous kisses by crocodiles."

While this harmony is unnecessary, harmony of the rhythm or movement with the meaning is required. Matthew Arnold has defined
movement, as a certain unflowing or progress of the thought through the discourse as a whole and through the expression”. The expression should agree with the spirit of the thought. Light and animated subjects, the lofty and sublime, require corresponding movement. What perfect peace is suggested by that line “The still morn went out with sandals grey.” In the lines:

"Cassandra went Apollo’s dearest from."
Daughter of a king, now sings alone
To woods and waves, passing winds, her song;
The flow of the woods emphasizes
The desolation they express. The
Sweetness of that expression from
One of the "lucy poems"—
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.
There is a majestic roll to Browning's
"Gods in his heaven,
All's well with the world."
Which belongs to the thought. That
perfect expression of a noble thought.
Which makes true poetry. The same
is true of Prospice, particularly in
the last lines—
"for sudden the worst turns the best to the brave
the black minutes at end.
and the elements rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
shall dwindle, shall blend,
shall change, shall become first a peacocook's pain
then a light, then thy breast.
other soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again
and with God be the rest.
and again in Wordsworth's
"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness.
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home;
Such passages, which have truth
of subject, truth + sincerity of treat-
ment and perfectly transparent
and harmonious expression, are
eamples of true poetry, which of
course, embraces all classical
literature. Mr Arnold has suggested that the critic's mind be well stored with such examples to be used as touch-stones to test the excellence of the work whose criticism he has undertaken.

Literary perfection lies in the best expression of the best idea. Its recognition in small portions of writing is within the power of the ordinary reader, but in extensive works, where the great question of unity must be considered, the appreciative reader must be a critic.