

Edited by Adam Parry

OXFORD

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS I I

1971

## The Historical Method in Literary Criticism\*

I DO not think that it is generally well enough understood how great a change has taken place in the last hundred years in the way in which we see the writing of past times. The change of which I speak has gradually been going ahead from the very beginning of the tradition of European reasoning, though now faster and now slower, and again with long set-backs, but in our own time the speed of that change has quickened and in the space of a very few years has created a critical point of view which is having, and will have, very far reaching results on human institutions in general, and particularly on the institution with which we are here concerned, the University.

I refer to nothing more than that which is familiarly known as the historical method in literary criticism, a point of view which is so obvious to us, or rather so much a part of us, that for that very reason we fail to see how much it sets our own intellectual times off from the past. Yet it is really a very new thing. Those who know Greek and Latin literature know that the principle was already stated in the fifth century before Christ, notably by Thucydides, but that classical literature as a whole either pretty well ignores it, or makes, at the best, rare and rudimentary attempts to apply it. The first exact statement of it in modern times seems to be that of Francis Bacon in his *Advance of Science* (*De augmentis scientiarum*). There we have what seems to be the first statement of the concept of literary history: 'General history without literary history is like a statue of blinded Polyphemus: what is lacking is just that which best shows the particular genius and character of the person.' And then on the next page he goes on: 'In the study of these things I wish that instead of passing our time like the critics in assigning praise and blame we should give a frankly historical account, and reserve our personal judgments.' And we can see that we should not reject this statement as nothing more than the now much questioned notion of so-called 'objective history', for he continues on the next page as follows: 'It is not by a mere exhaustive reading, which would really have no end, but by the

\* An address delivered by Milman Parry, as Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin, before the Board of Overseers of Harvard College at a meeting on 15 May 1934; first published in *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* 38 (1936), 778-82, and reprinted by permission. Copyright © 1936 by the Harvard Alumni Bulletin, Inc.

assimilation of the subject, the style, the method, that we must, as it were, call up from the dead the literary spirit of those times.'

It is only at the beginning of the last century, however, that this historical method of literary criticism suddenly begins to become a common point of view which we find frequently either assumed or expressly stated, and ever more and more, in critical writing. I shall mention only its statement by Ernest Renan who at least as much as any other man, if not more, moulded European thought in the last hundred years: 'How can we seize the physiognomy and the originality of early literatures if we do not enter into the moral and intimate life of a people, if we do not place ourselves at the very point in humanity which it occupied, in order to see and to feel with it, if we do not watch it live, or rather if we do not live for a while with it?'

Now I believe that the remarkable thing about that point of view is that it is one which can never reach completely, but only | come nearer to its attainment. The work upon it will never be done. The students of each generation, approaching the literature of some past period with the clearer sight which has been won for them by the earlier generation, will find in the best opinions on that past elements which jar with one another, or things which have been left out, or things which have been given too much place; and if they have head enough not to become befuddled by details—which is the great hazard—they will in their turn give a truer picture. I myself can see at present no current in the best modern thought which goes counter to this historical trend. The notion of relativity surely lies in this direction: if I say that Grote's account of democracy at Athens is more revealing of the mind of an English Liberal of the nineteenth century after Christ, than it recalls what actually took place in Athens in the fifth century before Christ, and then go on to admit that the opinion which I have just expressed about Grote may in turn reveal even more my own state of mind than it does that of Grote—(indeed, I know that I am expressing this thought here because I came across it about two weeks ago in one of the essays submitted for the Bowdoin prize essay contest and it struck me)—even in that case I am still doing no more than to try to attain a more perfect method for the historical approach to the thought of the past. And then apart from method, there are all the other fields of learning which concern themselves with man as he lived in the past, or lives in forms of society other than our own—history itself, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, the study of the plastic arts, of music, indeed, every field of learning right down to the physical sciences, is moving in this direction, and each subject lends knowledge to each other. So, gradually, we learn to keep ourselves out of the past, or rather we learn to go into it, becoming not merely a man who lived at another time than our own, but one who lived

in a certain nation, or city, or in a certain social class, and in very certain years, and sometimes—when we are concerned with a writer in that whereby he differs from his fellow men—we must not only enter into the place, the time, the class—we must even become the man himself, even more, we must become the man at the very moment at which he writes a certain poem.

I can then see nowhere in the critical study of literature anything to check this ever accelerating concern with the past as the past. But when one trained in this method (and I speak very particularly about myself, for the quotation which I gave above from Renan was once quoted by me in one of my own writings; indeed they were the first words in the first book which I ever published)—when one trained in this method, while still staying in the past, turns his eyes back to his own time, he cannot prevent a certain feeling of fear—not for the fact that he has become a ghost in the past, but because of what he sees in the person of his living self. For in the past, where his ghostly self is, he finds that men do the opposite of what he has been doing: they by their literature turn the past into the present, making it the mirror for themselves, and as a result the past as it is expressed in their literature has a hold upon them which shows up the flimsiness of the hold which our past literature has upon ourselves.

I shall try to show what I mean by an example drawn from the field which I myself teach, that of classical literature, and particularly from the Homeric poems on which I have done most of my writing. There is a famous passage in the twelfth book of the *Iliad* in which Sarpedon, the ally of the Trojans, calls upon his friend Glaucus to follow him to the assault on the Greek Wall: “If after escaping this war we were to become ageless and deathless, then would I not fight myself in the front ranks, nor urge you into the battle which gives men glory. But there are hazards of death beyond counting which stand above us, and which no man can escape or dodge. So let us go forward: we shall give glory to some man, or some man will give glory to us.” Now there is a passage in Matthew Arnold’s essay *On Translating Homer* in which he relates an incident concerning this passage; the story originally comes from Robert Wood’s *Essay on the Genius of Homer*, written in the eighteenth century, and one of the first books to bring into existence the well-known and so-called ‘Homeric Problem’. Robert Wood says that in 1762, at the end of the Seven Years’ War, being then Under-Secretary of State, he was directed to wait upon the President of the Council, Lord Granville, a few days before he died, with the preliminary articles of the Treaty of Paris. ‘I found him so languid that I proposed postponing my business for another time; but he insisted that I should stay, saying it could not prolong his life to neglect his duty, and repeating the following passage out of

Sarpedon's speech, he dwelled with particular emphasis on the third line, "Then would I not fight myself in the front ranks", which called to his mind the distinguished part he had taken in public affairs.' And then Lord Granville recited to himself in Greek the lines which I just gave you in translation.

Now I myself, because of the particular training in historical method, read those verses with an understanding which Lord Granville could never have had. I keep in mind, beyond doubt in a way which he never did, certain earlier lines in this same speech of Sarpedon in which that hero states the moral grounds which oblige them to high deeds: because their fellow countrymen give them at banquets the best cuts of meat, and keep their cups filled with wine, and have given them broad farm-lands. And then from my understanding of the speech of Sarpedon as a whole, from my knowledge of other early heroic poetries, from the general picture drawn of men of the heroic age by such scholars as Ker and Chadwick, and from what I myself have observed of traditional heroic poetry as it is still sung in the mountains of Hertzegovina, I see that this speech of Sarpedon is really a statement of the rewards and the responsibilities of prestige in the society of Homer's time—a society in which men were fewer in number, the social group smaller and its members known to one another, the mechanic arts still undeveloped, and warfare of a certain sort the constant condition of life. And so I make for myself a picture of great detail.

That is what that speech of Sarpedon must be to the scholar. To Homer and to the men who sat before him with their different cuts of meat, and their varyingly filled cups of wine, and their different recognized positions of importance in the community, it was another matter. It was the statement in heroic terms of their own way of life. More than that, it was a sanction and an ideal for that way of life. There was no separation there between what Sarpedon said and what they did and saw and admired every day. By not seeking to find out the past as it was (such a thought could not possibly even occur to them because they had never conceived that the past could be essentially different from the present), but making it the heroically magnified reflection of their own life, that past had become a very part of their being. The hold which Homer had on later centuries, though weaker, was of much the same sort. In one of the dialogues of Plato we find the *Iliad* praised because of the pointers it gives for chariot racing. Lord Granville was still reading Homer in this way, but there must have been few in his day, and how few now! And of those few who do, certainly the smallest part are the scholars.

Now the situation which I have described with relation to Homeric studies cannot be very different from that which applies to any other field of literary study, and to the whole body of the humanities as they

are taught in universities ; and this is what cannot keep me from a certain feeling of uneasiness as to the future not | only of classical studies, but also for the very existence of all our study of the literature of the past, whether in our own or in any other language. For men—even those few who study the literatures in universities, and those, even fewer and rarer, who reach the point where their familiarity with the literature of a certain period allows them to speak soundly about it—must, as they always have, attach their action to some emotional body of ideas which provides them with a moral code. They have always done this, presumably they always will, and one has only to look anywhere to see that they are doing it now. The chief emotional ideas to which men seem to be turning at present, as the older ones fade, are those of nationality—for which they exploit race—and class, and for these ideas they create a past by a fictitious interpretation. Anyone who has followed the history of the use of propaganda for political purposes, with its extraordinary development of intensity and technique in the last fifty years, cannot but have been struck by the many occasions on which those who were directing that propaganda expressed their lack of concern, or even contempt, for what actually was so, or actually had been so. Particularly the conception of relativity which I mentioned a while ago has been misused as a justification for this disregard of what truth we have.

To the student of literature, to myself as a student of Homer, this should be no surprise. The general process of early poetry, whereby what begins as an historical poem inevitably becomes a fictitious tale to idealize the present, is only repeating itself in its particular modern form, and must continue to do so until men again have a stable way of life in accord with a stable body of emotional thought. In the meanwhile the critical study of the past is finding itself in an ever more and more uncertain position. While it perfects its method and learns more about the past, the true understanding of what knowledge it has or gains is limited to a smaller and smaller number ; and from the standpoint of people in general it is probably now having a greater influence as a source of material for propaganda than as a source of real understanding of what is and has been. By its very method it is setting itself apart from human movements and advancing ahead to what may be its own destruction. In times of social changes and confusion, a bewildered people will seize with explosive suddenness upon some emotional idea and in a matter of months create a past for itself without bothering about the verity of details.

There is, so far as I can see, only one alternative to such a future. It is that the universities and the scholars must provide, and even impose upon a people, a sense of the nobility and the importance of their own search for knowledge. I can see no substitute for Plato's belief that there is nothing at the same time finer or more practical than the truth. In the

field with which I have been particularly concerned here, that of the literatures of the past, unless we can show not only a few students, but all those people whose action will determine the course of a whole nation, that, by identifying one's self with the past, with the men, or with a man of another time, one gains an understanding of men and of life and a power for effective and noble action for human welfare, we must see literary study and its method destroy itself. I have seen myself, only too often and too clearly, how, because those who teach and study Greek and Latin literature have lost the sense of its importance for humanity, the study of those literatures has declined, and will decline until they quit their philological isolation and again join in the movement of current human thought.

There is no question here of sacrificing the search for a fuller knowledge of the past. We surely can never know too much about what people have done, and how they came to do it; nor can one compromise with the truth. But the scholars must see that they must impose their truths | before others impose their fictions. They must create their heroic legend—or rather they must make it known—for the European humanistic tradition which we of the universities follow is no inglorious thing. Otherwise they will be choosing a future in which they must see themselves confined not by choice, but by compulsion, to be forever ineffective, if they would not be untruthful.