

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE V.

THE INDEBTEDNESS OF LATER ENGLISH
LITERATURE TO EARLIER.

BY PROFESSOR THEODORE W. HUNT, PH.D., LITT.D.

CHRONOLOGICALLY viewed, we mean by our "earlier" literature that portion of it lying between the "Paraphrase" of Cædmon, in the seventh century, and the Revival of Learning, in the sixteenth,—a period, in so far as time is concerned, of nine centuries, as compared with the more than three centuries that have passed since the days of Elizabeth. It is naturally divisible into the Old-English Period, from Cædmon to the Norman Conquest of 1066, or to the close of the "Chronicle," in 1154, on through the age of Chaucer to the days of Henry the Eighth, and the opening of the reign of Elizabeth, in 1558. No careful student of what may be called, *The Historical Development of English Letters*, can fail at the very outset of his inquiries, to institute the question now suggested, What is the chronological and logical relation of these several centuries to each other,—the later to the earlier, the progressive and settled to the initial and formative, and to what degree in particular may the one be said to be dependent on the other?

We notice, first of all, that, *a priori*, there must exist this historical order, and that it must be studied as an essential factor in literary interpretation. That is but a partial and unscholarly examination of any subject which begins midway in the series of developments that it includes. There is such a thing

as historical unity and continuity in literature, a well-established law of sequence as vital in its place and action as in any sphere of liberal study or social and civic order. The classical ages of Pericles and Augustus cannot be rationally interpreted apart from a knowledge of antecedent Greek and Roman letters. It would not be in order to open the investigation of Italian letters with Ariosto or even with Petrarch, nor that of France and Germany with Racine and Klopstock. None the less safely can the English student begin with Spenser and Shakespeare and begin aright. The study of the Periclean and Augustan eras, representative as they were, and because representative, must be antedated by that of the eras preceding, though inferior; that of Petrarch by that of Dante and his forerunners and the influence of Arabia in Southern Europe, and that of Molière by that of the Trouvères and Troubadours and Rabelais and Ronsard. Before we study Klopstock's Messiah and the new classical era that he inaugurated in Germany, the Minnesänger and Meistersänger must be examined. So, in England, we must go back of Elizabeth to Edward the Third, and back of Chaucer to the "Chronicle," and the Conquest, and back of the Anglo-Norman to the oldest English of Alfred and Cynewulf and Ælfric and Cædmon. This is particularly true of English poetry. Inasmuch as our prose did not take national form till the days of Hooker and Bacon, the principle of continuity as related to the pre-Elizabethan centuries is not, perchance, so conspicuous and real. In English verse, however, it is radically different, in that Chaucer stands at the opening of a national movement, and he himself embodies its spirit.

Whatever may be the relation of Hooker to Wiclif as prose writers, or of Raleigh to Fortescue, or of the sixteenth century in general to the fifteenth and fourteenth, the relation of

Spenser to Chaucer, and of the Elizabethan poets to their predecessors, is historic and undoubted, and must be so regarded by every discerning student. There is such a study as Literary Palæontology; a recurrence, by necessity, to first conditions, first forms and movements, not only by reason of their intrinsic importance, but because of their interpretative relation to conditions and tendencies that follow them and which are partly occasioned by them. There is in English letters, as in the Scriptures, an Old Testament as well as a New, to be together examined and as mutually explanatory.

Such being the nexus, *a priori*, between the younger and the older England in the sphere of letters, it is worthy of remark that the fuller acknowledgment of such a relation is one of the most healthful signs of the times. So rapidly are long-existing prejudices disappearing in the light of new conditions, so surely has tradition given place to fact and educational demand in our modern institutions of learning, that there is no longer need of labored argument whereby to arouse the indifferent. "It can hardly be necessary to insist on the fact," writes Earle, "that our time is characterized by a desire for the restitution of vernacular English. Amidst all the diversities of literary English of this century, the one predominant and universal character is the growing appetite for the original and native forms of the mother tongue." What Earle here applies with special emphasis to the English language is substantially applicable to English literature in its entirety. As the philosophers are calling us back to Kant, and the theologians calling us back to Paul, so are the wisest of our English critics calling us back to the olden time of Alfred and Chaucer and Caxton.

The subject of interest, therefore, which confronts us, is that of the general and specific forms in which such indebt-

edness of our later to our earlier literature has expressed and is expressing itself, as the history of the literature develops from age to age. As far as general indebtedness is concerned, there are three or four literary qualities directly traceable to this earlier influence which it would be well for our Modern-English Letters to conserve with an ever-stricter fidelity.

1. The first of these is *Literary Vigor* or *Spirit*, as opposed to all that is impotent, indifferent, and spiritless,—a strong and stalwart energy of soul, expressing itself in varied forms of efficiency, and proof against all attempts to stifle it. The most captious critics of our older authorship have never denied it this claim of literary vigor. Even if it be conceded that the literature of this earlier time was in a sense unliterary or non-literary, somewhat crude in type and quite devoid of any marked artistic quality, it has been contended, with equal zeal, that what was lacking in artistic finish was fully supplied in mental force, and in the pronounced personality of the respective authors. Nor is it at all difficult to account for such a type of authorship. It comes by racial inheritance, by specific natural tradition, through the medium of established historic sequence. It is of genuine Germanic origin, Gothic and Teutonic, as distinct from Latinic; a real North-European contribution to general letters, and to the English in particular, conspicuously contrasted with the South-European type, save in so far as such a type may be said to have entered somewhat to modify the old Gothic bluntness of manners. Hence the marked epic and dramatic quality of much of the older verse, as it appears in the graphic lines of "Beowulf," the great battle-epic of Old English; in "The Battle of Maldon" and "The Battle of Brunanburh," the two most famous Old-English battle-lyrics; in "Elene," with its

sacred story of Constantine and the Cross; in the recorded battles of the "Chronicle"; in the various Legends of heroes and martyrs, such as Guthlac and Juliana and Judith and Saint Andrew, who suffered and triumphed on behalf of right and truth and honor and chastity. In the later Middle-English period, the same undaunted spirit is manifest in Layamon's "Brut" and Robert of Gloucester's "Chronicle"; in the political tributes of Minot to English valor; in the trenchant satire of Chaucer and Langlande against all tyranny and corruption in church and state; as in the verse and prose of Lydgate and Skelton and Wiclif and Latimer down to the days of Sir Thomas Wyatt, in his bold defense of the common people against the exactness of kings and courtiers, when monasteries hoary with age were dissolved in the interests of public liberty and social order; when free discussion took the place of bigotry, and the way was opened for the wide diffusion of liberty and learning. All this is in the line of specific literary vigor, an order of character and style fortunately illustrated at the very opening of our literary history, and thus setting the form for all that was to follow. Thus it is in no sense surprising that when the authors of our first modern era, in the days of Elizabeth, addressed themselves to their literary work, they did it with the open page of this earlier history before them, and felt it incumbent upon them to preserve the historic reputation of the nation's authorship for mental and literary strength. After the Golden Age down to the Victorian Era, so faithful has been this adherence to the best traditions of the past, that the era of the Stuart Restoration may be said to be the only one that has marked a forgetfulness of it, while even then the voice of protest was often heard and heeded. What has rightly been called, the Old-English directness of statement, saying what is meant with

monosyllabic brevity, is but one of the many phases of this inherent terseness of statement, a real historic counterpart of the laconic language of Sparta.

3. The second literary quality which bears the evident marks of its early origin, and furnishes to Modern-English Literature a valid element of indebtedness, is *Naturalness*,—an order of utterance singularly notable for its unstudied character, its independence of schools and models, of established rules and methods. We may call it spontaneity, the free outspokenness of men and authors who felt that they were free to think and speak for themselves, and who further felt that the obligation was upon them to set the form of free expression for all the generations that were to follow. The Great Charter of political freedom which the Barons wrested from King John in the opening years of the thirteenth century was fully paralleled by the manner in which our older authors insisted, in the face of all opposition, that their thoughts were their own, for which they alone were responsible, and that to modify or suppress them was to run counter to their best instincts and interests, and to be untrue to their lineage as English. "Be that thou art" was the accepted motto of the time; no less, no more, none other. Here again, as in the expression of literary vigor, it often happened that a high degree of æsthetic finish was sacrificed to the artless utterances of nature, nor did the literature in the end sustain any permanent loss thereby. Of all the pre-Elizabethan authors who embodied in their spirit and work this invaluable quality of *Naturalness*, it was Alfred and Chaucer, the respective representatives of tenth-century prose and fourteenth-century verse, who most thoroughly expressed it, and left an impression upon the literature of the time which nothing finite can efface. Speaking after the manner of the jurist at the bar,

we might rest the case of the obligations of later to earlier English at this particular point, with Alfred and Chaucer, who were nothing if not natural, asking no questions, founding no school, taking counsel of themselves and the most urgent demands of the time, eager to reveal the truth that nature precedes art, that in literature there must be freedom, and the impulses of the heart be allowed to assert themselves. The Old-English word "Freshness" well expresses this tonic quality in these authors, as we speak of the freshness of an October morning, the out-of-door life of the woods and streams as contrasted with the seclusion of the cloister and library. There is thus a sense in which it is true that every literary age since then, in so far as it has been natural, has been somewhat indebted to them for its original impulse, as all eras devoid of this feature have marked a departure from older standards. It was so in the free expression of Elizabethan letters, especially in poetry; in the spontaneity of Milton's prose and verse; in the natural lines of Goldsmith and Burns and Moore. What is known as the Romantic Revival was but a reproduction in the modern era of this genuine Chaucerian spirit, the clear recall of the nation to its best poetic past, if so be it was to keep even pace with other nations in the development of letters. Even now, as contemporary English literature is unfolding, we are reminded, once and again, that we cannot forget, if we would, that Alfred's prose and Chaucer's verse have had no superior as specimens of natural English.

3. An additional feature of indebtedness is seen in the uniform *Sobriety* of the older writers; induced, partly, by what Taine would call the natural temperament of the English race; partly, by the peculiar and often adverse conditions under which our earlier literature was developed;

partly, it would seem, by the close relation of the older authorship to the ecclesiastical life of the time; and somewhat, also, by an evident purpose on the part of these authors to embody all literature in ethical form, both for the well-being, as they thought, of literature itself, and that of the general public. It was, indeed, this spirit of personal and literary seriousness that the Angles and Saxons found in the fifth century so impressively illustrated in the original Celtic population of Britain, when Britain was full of native Celtic teachers, and missionaries from the Continent entered to extend the evangelistic work. This feature first appears in our earliest English epic, the "Paraphrase" of Cædmon, which, as scriptural in its basis and content, naturally is characterized throughout by a specific sedateness of manner. It appears in the successive translations and versions of the Bible into the vernacular, if so be our oldest prose and verse might, at the very beginning, be rightly impressed and directed. Thus Bede prepared the Gospels; Aldhelm and Alfred, the Psalms; Ælfric, the Pentateuch; and Wiclif and Tyndale, the Bible as a whole. Thus Bede wrote his "Ecclesiastical History of Britain," and Alfred, his version of Boethius' "Consolation of Philosophy." So Cynewulf wrote his "Andreas" and "Elene" and "Christ," a notable Trilogy of sacred song. Even in "Beowulf," the great pagan, secular epic of the time, there is seen this pervasive gravity of tone and purpose in its portraiture of the severe Northern life of the Scandinavian peoples as related to the English. So Layamon and Orm and their contemporaries wrote sacred and secular treatises on behalf of truth and purity. When Sir John Mandeville wrote of his travels in the East, it was in this distinctively serious manner, while Caxton, the first English printer, and Hugh Latimer, the great Plantagenet reformer and preacher, wrote

and taught for the same great end. The church and the school were practically one institution. Even the church and the stage were inseparably connected. The current sayings and proverbs of the time were begotten of the more serious moods of the common mind. What such satirists as Lydgate, Skelton, Gascoigne, and Langlande wrote they wrote with the soberest intent; so that it is not too much to say that the current distinction between the secular and the sacred was well-nigh effaced in this older era. In fine, look where we will in the prose and verse, the student is impressed by the fact that he is reading an order of authors who thought, first of all, of the moral effect of their writings, and but secondarily of their specific literary value.

Nor should it be forgotten that, as a whole, the literature, though serious, was not serious to a fault, dwelling by preference on the more forbidding phases of human life, and making a virtue of despondency. Despite the allegations of Taine and other higher critics, the dominant tone is sedate without being sombre; manly without being morose; and designed above all to impress upon the reader the necessity and duty of looking upon life from a rational point of view. One will search in vain among these older poets for such a character as Byron, or such a poem as "Don Juan," or "Queen Mab," or "Chastelard." The temper of the time, the character of the authors, and their literary conscience made such an order of verse impossible. The older literature had its errors and defects, in the form of limitation of outlook, partial development, lack of æsthetic taste and undue conservatism, but not in the line of the unwholesome or of questionable motive and spirit.

Such are the three specific qualities received by inheritance from our earlier literature—Vigor, Naturalness, and Sobriety,

nor can they be too sedulously cherished as our literary history develops; first of all, a trenchant order of style, where the writer fearlessly reveals his mind and in language unmistakably clear; next to this, an unstudied and self-expressing freedom of utterance, independent of all formalism or restrictive literary statute; and, last of all, a well-ordered gravity of diction and spirit, whereby literature may be safely guarded against excess, and developed on behalf of truth and the highest human interests. In a word, vitality and sanity make up the legacy received, a healthful and normal order of expression, which, with all its faults and limitations, has never been charged with indifference or a disregard of what is most beneficent to a people's life and letters.

It is in place to note with emphasis the fact that these are the three special qualities that are somewhat in jeopardy as modern literary tendencies reveal themselves. In so far as these tendencies are at present capable of interpretation, they may be said to lie in the line of literary impotency, undue attention to technique, and an increasing representation of human life on its cheerless and hopeless side. Such a lack of masculine virility is especially noticeable in modern fiction, undue attention to verbal structure being prominent in verse; while, in prose fiction and poetry alike, the utterances of the pessimist find too frequent expression. In this last class of authors are such notable names as Matthew Arnold and Clough. Tennyson himself has often erred on the side of verbal mechanism, while the large majority of miscellaneous prose writers and poets add nothing, when they write, to the substantive intellectual product of the time. These are tendencies only, but none the less perilous, and are to be carefully noted and corrected by all who are interested in the progress of English Letters. Signs of protest are already at hand.

Here and there, earnest voices are raised, recalling the nation to its earlier history. The present poet-laureate, whatever his defects, is zealously working along this higher line. The poetry of Watson is attracting deserved attention, especially by reason of the natural impulse that inspires it, the old Chaucerian life and spirit; while not a few of those who class themselves of the school of Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne are not afraid to rebuke the verbal mechanism, obscurity, and sensuousness of these respective authors. As nations increase in wealth and power, and social conditions become more complex, and life departs more and more widely from primitive ideals, so a nation's literature assumes the same abnormal features, and becomes less and less distinctive.

SUGGESTIONS.

From this discussion some inferences of value follow:—

1. We notice, that, in so far as English letters are concerned, the study of the earlier literature necessarily involves the study of the language, in a sense not actual or possible in modern eras. English literature and English philology are not only more intimately connected in the pre-Elizabethan period than in any subsequent era, but they are practically and historically one and the same study. Inasmuch as the prose of Alfred and the verse of Cædmon and Cynewulf must be approached and interpreted through grammar and glossary and Old-English text, the student of this oldest literature finds himself perforce a student of English on its linguistic side, emphasizing the language first and the literature afterward. Even after the Norman Conquest, and the close of the "Chronicle," in the latter part of the twelfth century, as the student finds himself among the products of fourteenth-century English down to the days of Caxton and Wyatt, there is a sense

in which the study of English philology is the necessary prerequisite of the study of English literature; the text of "The Canterbury Tales" and "Piers the Plowman" affording a convenient manual for the specifically linguistic examination of fourteenth-century English. So prominent, indeed, and essential, is this philological feature, that, here and there, critics of the literature have started the question as to the possibility of assigning the beginning of English literature proper to a period prior to the reign of Henry the Seventh. Such a question is a plausible and natural one, and yet a superficial one, proving entirely too much in its application to other literatures. It loses sight of the fact that literature, in its evident province, embraces every product of authorship, prose, and verse, earlier and later, quite irrespective of the special stage of the development of the language at the publication of any particular work. Certainly, Greek literature is not confined to modern or spoken Greek, but is mainly treasured up in what may be called the strictly philological form of the authorship, when lexicon and commentary and grammar must be studied in order to reach the literature. This is eminently true of all dead languages, the literature of which, because they are unspoken, is only to be found by linguistic examination. Even in the tongues of Modern Continental Europe, as the German and French, the same principle is approximately true. Old and Middle High German are subjects of philological investigation in a sense not true of Modern German, and yet no one would be so narrow as to affirm that German literature, as such, does not begin till the days of Luther. The same may be said of Old French as distinct from Modern French; the former being a more distinctively philological study, and yet having a literature of its own, vitally related to all that follows it. So with our vernacular as a language and

literature in its older eras, it being reserved for the modern era of Shakespeare, Milton, and Addison to assign the linguistic and the literary to their respective spheres. Herein lie the unity and diversity of English philology and letters, and without any violation of historical fact or logical principle.

2. A second suggestion of interest may be in this form: Post-Elizabethan Authors, Periods, and Literary Movements may be tested and classified in the light of this historic indebtedness, as to whether or not they have acknowledged it at all, and, if acknowledging it, to what degree and with what measure of enthusiasm. In the Age of Elizabeth as the Golden Age of the English drama and English literature in general, and the first era of Modern-English letters, and thus chronologically nearer to the older epoch, it is natural to find a free and full appreciation of such a relation of interdependence, so that Spenser aimed to reinstate the influence of Chaucer, and Shakespeare himself, with all his genius, made constant reference to the earlier chroniclers, as affording him the necessary data for his dramatic work. The relation of the Elizabethan drama, historically viewed, to the Old-English drama, is patent to every English scholar; the nexus being so vital and pronounced that Mr. Lowell ignores all distinctions of time, and discusses the writings of Ford, Chapman, Marlowe, and Massenger under the common caption of Old-English Dramatists. In the reign of the Stuarts this bond of relationship is less conspicuous, though existent; the influence of Milton, especially in his poetry, being strongly conservative in this direction. Such less notable authors as Herbert, Wither, Fuller, and Walton, both in the letter and spirit of their writings, did much to perpetuate this historic-literary movement. The influence of France in the middle years of the Stuart dynasty was far too dominant to allow the old Alfredian and

Chaucerian spirit to have its legitimate sway, while even such standard authors as Dryden and Pope may be said to have done little or nothing in the line of such acknowledgment, Dryden's attempted modernization of Chaucer totally failing of any beneficent result. It was not till the rise of the Romantic era, and the beginning of what Mr. Courthope has called *The Liberal Movement in English Letters*, that this acknowledgment of the older authorship was again distinctive and appreciated and the way widely opened for what was best in Elizabethan letters. Thomson, Cowper, Burns, Wordsworth, Goldsmith, and Byron breathed this fresher air, and awakened anew the dormant energies of the England of their day; while down through the reign of the successive Georges, and well on to the time of Tennyson, the spirit of the literature may be said to have expressed a happy combination of the old and the new, the traditional and the progressive. Tennyson did an invaluable work in calling his countrymen to an appreciative survey of the literary England that lay far behind them in the days of Malory and the old Celtic legends of Arthur and his Knights. Mr. Brooke, after stating "that the Norman Conquest put to the sword what was left in Wessex of English literature," hastens to add, "Though sorely wounded, English literature was not slain. It retired from the world in country villages, in secluded monasteries, slowly gathering strength, assimilating fresh influences until Norman and English were woven politically into one people." It is these "fresh influences" that found their way by natural process down through the Middle-English Period to the day of Wordsworth and our own American Whittier, and bid fair to be a permanent feature of every future era. The Old and the New English are in a sense contemporary.

In fine, there is such a principle as Relativity in Literature,

such a spirit as the Historico-Literary Spirit, a deference to the past partly because it is past, and because, as such, it holds the beginnings of all later movements. King Alfred has been dead a thousand years, and Chaucer five hundred, and, yet, they are as much alive to-day in all English-speaking countries as if they were walking along our streets and conversing with us; so clear is the literary debt of the twentieth century to the tenth and the fourteenth.