

Books of Special Interest

What Is Irony?

IRONY: An Historical Introduction. By J. A. K. THOMSON. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1927.

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ONE who has read Mr. Thomson's beautiful interpretations of Greek literature and history in "The Greek Tradition" and "Greeks and Barbarians" is slightly repelled by the stiff title and formal arrangement in this new volume. The sub-title, "An Historical Introduction," has a musty-dusty savor of antiquity. The headings of the chapters are colorless Roman numerals with annoying minute letters marking subdivisions of thought. What catches the eye is a quotation on the fly leaf,

The glory, jest, and riddle of the world, and an informal dedication of thanks to Gilbert Murray for his understanding sympathy.

Any thoughtful reader will find here a new type of literary criticism. Greek literature is reviewed, not chronologically, but from the point of view of an informing spirit. The subject, irony, cannot be defined, but is set forth through Greek literature itself. The word Eiron came into literature through comedy and meant the cunning, primitive man, the Caliban, who fearing the ever-present jealousy of Heaven, pretends to be less than he is. In comedy this ironical man is in conflict with the Alazon, or Impostor, who professes to be something more than he is. By their varying importance, three elements, Alazon, Eiron, and Fortune or Deity, determine the type of irony in different forms of literature.

In Aristophanes' "Acharnians" or "Clouds," the fool runs his head against the force of circumstances and falling is a comic-ironic figure. In Æschylus' "Agamemnon" or Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex" the hero challenges destiny and falls, a tragic-ironic figure. And the horror of such tragedy is that the spectator foresees the fall and breathlessly awaits the events, thus be-

coming a participant in the irony of the plot. The irony of Euripides is more modern, a subjective irony motivated by an emotion too strong to tread the boards unmasked, bred perhaps of "a sadness from some defeat of high illusions."

To give any idea of the content of the book one must thus use its very phraseology. Mr. Thomson, after establishing by analysis, paraphrase, and translation the origin and essence of irony, shows that both comic and tragic irony existed in Homer; that Herodotus's History might have for a subtitle "The Tragedy of King Xerxes," and for that "the whole machinery of dramatic irony is brought into action;" that Thucydides's History, like drama, represents the clash of human Hubris and divine Nemesis until his irony acquires "tremendous force from its apparent substantiation by the naked facts;" that the great Eiron of Dialogue is the Platonic Socrates, whose irony was manifested as "emotion tempered by common sense, common sense transfigured by emotion." Lucian, at last, was the link between ancient and modern irony because he made irony satirical and used it for defense. This weapon of his was handed down to Erasmus, More, and Rabelais.

A brief review of Roman irony shows less irony in Latin literature than in Greek, and that imitative. There are particularly illuminating pages on Horace and on Tacitus who writing on "the wrath of God upon the Roman people" "with hue like that when some great painter dips his pencil in the gloom of earthquake and eclipse" manifested the Apocalypse of the tragic irony.

But this was not all.

The tragic irony found its way into the modern world. . . . The thoughts of men about life and death may change, or at least be cheered by a new hope, but life and death themselves remain, and while they remain can never fail to provide a sufficiency of tragic matter. The problem of evil, the problem of unmerited suffering, is with us as much as with the ancients. We have dropped one answer to the Sphinx, but she has not yet cast herself from her rock. There is still on her lips that smile which we call irony. How to interpret it

is the business of philosophy, perhaps of religion. How to express it is the business of art. And this we learned from the Greeks.

That final paragraph suggests the author's distinguished style, but only the book itself with its *lucidus ordo*, fine insight, delicate appreciations, and *lo bello stile* can show how truly it presents the problems of The glory, jest, and riddle of the world.

From the Other World

THE HISTORY OF SPIRITUALISM. By Sir ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE. New York: George H. Doran. 1927. 2 vols. \$7.50.

ALL of us who remember our youth owe a debt of gratitude to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. But even in those far-off days of "Micah Clarke," "The White Company," and the adventures of the egregious "Sherlock Holmes," he never wrote a better children's story than his "History of Spiritualism." We accompany Swedenborg to his amazing paradise; we hear the "speaking with tongues" in Edward Erving's church; we watch the incursion of Red Indian spirits among the Shakers; we listen to Andrew Jackson Davis's prophecy in mesmeric trance; we are present at the historic midnight scene of March 31, 1848, when Kate Fox snapped her fingers, crying, "Here, old Splitfoot, do as I do," and the knockings instantly responded (italics Doyle's); and thenceforth, the introduction over, we move among ever greater marvels, perceiving Henry Slade pass material objects through one another, D. D. Home fly across the air, Kate King grow and diminish, Eusapia Palladino put forth strange ectoplasmic limbs, and spooks innumerable, felt and weighed and photographed. But when one asks what basis of fact lies behind this interesting narrative he gets no satisfactory answer. The author is so careless of elementary historical scholarship that he rarely refers to his sources and when he does the footnote nearly always points to some Spiritualistic magazine. His "History" is made up largely of hearsay evidence; such statements as the following abound:

"Hundreds of respectable citizens of Buffalo are reported to have seen these occurrences."

"He was said to know no German, yet messages in German appeared on the slates."

This sort of testimony the author regards as entirely conclusive. On the other hand, the exposures of Slade, Monk, Eusapia Palladino,—and even the confession of Margaret Fox herself,—fail to shake his faith in those very mediums. The negative reports of investigations at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, the Sorbonne, and elsewhere are all discredited. The Society for Psychical Research comes in for sharp criticism because of its exaggerated skepticism! All in all, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle impresses one as perhaps the worst judge of historical evidence that could possibly be found.

Nor is one's confidence restored by "Pheneas Speaks," the record of alleged spirit communications to Sir Arthur's wife, which she obtained through automatic writing or in a state of semi-trance. Pheneas claims to be an Arabian who lived at Ur of the Chaldees before the time of Abraham. Possibly this accounts for the fact that his English never rises above the level of the first reader; yet this seems improbable because several other spirits who occasionally chime in speak in exactly the same style. The messages of Pheneas offer hygienic advice—"Take bismuth twice a day;" alluring pictures of heaven as a quiet park-like place—"We have got a most beautiful—oh, beautiful! space of green grass, very open and large, where they have wonderful games, every game," where, best of all, "There will be no motor cars or noise to disturb the wonderful beauty;" personal encouragement—"You have a great work set apart for you to do; it is a beautiful work, and . . . you will get great advancement in the other world through it;" praise of the medium—"She will be wonderful. She has God's great work to do;" much talk of the immediate second coming of Christ—to England, naturally—when "the things which are done in God's name which are cruel and wicked will not be able to exist. All shams will be swept away by then, and only truth will live . . . There will be a great change in the manner of life in the world . . . People will live for real things, not shams, for God and for their neighbors." If these messages are veridic, Sir Arthur and his wife must have come in touch with the most repetitious bore that ever got into heaven by mistake. The idea of spending an eternity with Pheneas makes the thought of annihilation very sweet.



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