

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

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### Scholarship and Popularity

THE *Princeton University Press Almanac*, prefacing its remarks with the statement that some years ago a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. at the New Jersey institution had attempted to make his thesis readable only to have it returned on the score that it looked insufficiently scholarly and should have more footnotes, references, and quotations, proceeds to ask "Why is it, we wonder, that scholars feel that a book which is popular cannot be scholarly, or perhaps it would be more accurate to inquire why they feel that a scholarly, or sound, book cannot be popular?"

Many a scholar undoubtedly, having in mind such writers of the last century as Greene and Huxley, and of the present as Robinson and Eddington, would hasten to disavow such an attitude. Yet there can be little question that on the whole the *Almanac's* editor is correct in assuming that the tendency of the scholar is to be sceptical of the book which is popular, and doubtful of the popularity of the book which is scholarly. Experience has taught him to be,—experience and knowledge of the facility that is the curse of our contemporary civilization. Here in America, especially, we are a facile people—not volatile as are some of the Latin nations who are lively and facile in their emotions and enthusiasms—but facile in the ease with which we adapt ourselves to circumstances and circumstances to ourselves. We have a natural aptitude for the practical, an inventiveness and a self-confidence that incline us to a belief in our own powers. We have also an impatience of disposition which is at once strange in a nation that hewed its civilization out of a wilderness and explicable in a people which triumphantly surmounted enormous hazards. Having conquered difficulties, we resent barriers. We have formed the habit of rushing them, and if they are intellectual rather than physical we still want to take them at a hurdle. We are, moreover, a literate people, in comparison with some of the older nations which still retain a caste system, an educated people. Consequently we have a thirst for knowledge. But we want it to come, like business success and national greatness, quickly. Hence the vast amount of popular science, of journalized history and biography and economics that fills our newspapers and our periodicals.

The doubting scholar is right very frequently in believing that the book which is popular, or perhaps, we should say, written for popularity, is not scholarly. Often, all too often it is the product of the journalist's pen, a pen skilled to present with animation facts which have been culled with a nice sense for the significant and the striking from a quarry the quality of whose contents its wielder has insufficient knowledge to estimate. That facility of which we spoke before as native to the American is nowhere more apparent than in the field of literature where fluency and a gift for sprightly expression seem to be a dower so general as to be usual. There is an enormous amount of informative writing constantly issuing from the press that is interesting, instructive, often accurate, but that merely skims the surface of knowledge. In so far as he bases his belief that popular writing cannot be scholarly on this grist the objector is right in his strictures.

But is he right when he holds that a scholarly, or sound, book cannot be popular? We believe not, except if by scholarly he may mean abstruse or pedantic. And that is merely to maintain that a book that is unintelligible except to the specialist or overlaid with erudite detail cannot be of interest to the many. Scholarship in itself will never make for lack of popularity in a book,—only the failure

### This Tree

By FRANCES M. FROST

TODAY being what it is, tomorrow being  
Something quite different, and yesterday  
Over and done with, I shall stand here, seeing  
This gaunt tree on the sky, and note the way  
The limbs go north. I shall, perhaps, indulge  
In some brief speculation on the why  
Of northward-blowing branches that divulge  
A windy beauty even when they die.

Knowing today an entity, no part  
Of hours past or hours yet to come,  
I shall look sharply in at my own heart  
And see this tree set down to raise the sum  
Of things the day laid open to my sight.  
And I shall wonder, peering through the slit  
Reft in tomorrow by approaching night,  
What I shall think of then, remembering it.

### This Week

"The Ascent of Humanity."

Reviewed by JOSEPH JASTROW.

"The Cycle of Modern Poetry."

Reviewed by HARRY HAYDEN CLARK.

"Sham-Battle."

Reviewed by FRANK H. SIMONDS.

"Homeplace."

Reviewed by HERSCHEL BRICKELL.

"Soldiers of Misfortune."

Reviewed by ROBERT B. MACDOUGALL.

Night Club."

Reviewed by JOHN CARTER.

"Civic Training in Soviet Russia."

Reviewed by WILLIAM C. HUNTINGTON.

"The Woman Who Commanded  
500,000,000 Men."

Reviewed by FLORENCE AYSCOUGH.

"The Irish Free State."

Reviewed by FRANK MONAGHAN.

### Next Week, or Later

The Romany.

By WALTER STARKIE.

of scholarship to write in terms comprehensible to the multitude. William James never lacked for a public that reached far beyond the confines of the university, and William James was proclaimed by Europe one of the foremost scholars and philosophers of his day. Every schoolboy has read Prescott, and Prescott in his field is still a scholar unsurpassed. We cease to present examples; to labor the point is a work of supererogation. No one is so benighted as seriously to hold that learning as such is a handicap. On the other hand, there is no denying that learning unadorned by imagination, and inarticulate except in a technical jargon, is unattractive to the masses. If actually a book that is "scholarly, or sound, cannot be popular," it is not because scholarship *per se* cannot be attractive but because scholars do not know how to make the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth wear variety and significance even while they are maintaining accuracy. Nothing could be more fatal for scholarship than

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### Johnson and Poetry\*

By R. W. CHAPMAN

THIS is the subject of an ancient controversy, which is not likely to be settled. It was not long ago revived by the publication by Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate, of a collection of his prose writings. Among these is one which Dr. Bridges illustrates by an examination of "Lycidas," "Adonais," and "Thyrsis." In his remarks on "Lycidas" he naturally glances at Johnson's notorious criticism, which he ascribes to the operation of "common sense" and "an unpoetic mind."

This view of Johnson is, of course, nothing new. In his own day he was accused of blasphemy against Shakespeare; and those of his contemporaries who disliked him, for political or personal reasons, fastened with glee upon those passages in the lives of Milton and of Gray by which, as they imagined, the Lord had delivered him into their hands. In our time, some of his verdicts on Shakespeare and Milton have been unsparingly condemned. The latest writer on Johnson, Mr. Christopher Hollis, though a fervid admirer of his character and of his writings, declares him "incapable of esthetic appreciation." "The window of beauty was a window through which he could never look." "For poetry, in the strict sense of the word, he cared nothing."

Hero-worshippers are prone to the mistake of making for their hero extravagant and unnecessary claims. Boswell could not be completely happy unless Johnson were allowed to derive some "additional lustre" from his knowledge of Greek. Johnson has himself warned us against this error. "We must confess the faults of our favorite (he has the temerity to write of Shakespeare) to gain credit to our praise of his excellencies." Even the most ardent Johnsonians are now content to admit that it matters little how much Greek Johnson knew. It is not now necessary to anyone's happiness that he should think Johnson a great poet, nor perhaps even that he should regard him as an exceptionally subtle and discriminating judge of poetic excellence. But if we are asked to believe him "incapable of esthetic appreciation" our peace of mind is at an end. For the appreciation of great poetry is not a rare gift. Dr. Bridges in his discussion of "Lycidas" makes his appeal to the verdict of common men and even of children. "Lycidas" has, in spite of the extravagance of its conventions, grown in favor, and firmly holds its claim to be one of the most beautiful of the great masterpieces of English verse." He rightly dismisses the notion that "Lycidas" can be admired only by the learned; "it might be urged," he tells us,

that with Milton and Shelley, who were educated by Hellenic models, and had come by reading and meditation to have panoramic views of history and truth, it was natural to write at that height—their poetic diction may be the spontaneous utterance of their subconscious mind—but that it is nevertheless regrettable because common folk whom they might otherwise delight and instruct cannot understand it. This is a wrong notion. It was not Dr. Johnson's ignorance or deficient education that made him dislike "Lycidas." It was his unpoetic mind that was at fault, and his taste in music or painting would probably have been at the same level. Moreover, children do not resent what they cannot understand in poetry, and they generally have a keener sense for beauty than Dr. Johnson had—indeed, if he would have become again as a little child, he might have liked "Lycidas" very well.

We know that Dr. Johnson had no ear for music; neither had Charles Lamb. His indifference to painting (which he perhaps humorously exaggerated) may be explained by the same disabilities

\* The following article constitutes the greater part of an address delivered by Mr. Chapman in 1928 in Lichfield on the occasion of the 219th anniversary of Johnson's birth.



which forced him to abstain from botany. But note that his blindness and deafness to painting and music are openly and brazenly proclaimed by himself. He does not say, and could not have believed, that his taste in poetry was "at the same level." No. If Dr. Bridges is right, then Johnson, in devoting the best years of his life to the study and criticism of poetry was guilty of a tragic error. He mistook, and misused, his transcendent gifts.

It is now clear that I and those who think with me, must not pretend to take a dispassionate view of this question. Our affections are engaged. "Truth will always bear examination," a Scotch lawyer told Johnson. "Yes, sir, but it is painful to be forced to defend it. . . . Being angry with one who controverts an opinion which you value is a necessary consequence of the uneasiness which you feel. Every man who attacks my belief, diminishes in some degree my confidence in it, and therefore makes me uneasy."

But, unbelievers will perhaps ask, why, in the face of the strong evidence which they adduce, must we insist upon poetic susceptibility as a part of Johnson's character? Why are we not content to admire and revere him as a great moralist, a great prose writer, an unchallenged master of practical wisdom? The answer is, I think, that on those terms we might admire Johnson, but could not love him. It is not possible—at this distance of time—to love a man, however great and good, who thinks "Lycidas" a bad poem, unless we can satisfy ourselves with some explanation of that strange opinion, short of stark insensibility. Dr. Bridges has told us, in effect, that Johnson was a pedant, to whom the vision that is given to children was not given. Has he not proved too much? Could worldly wisdom, however fortified by morality, however illumined by intellectual power, retain that hold upon the hearts of men which Johnson has always had, if his humanity were indeed destitute of that part of human excellence which we call the love of beauty?



Before we approach the problem of Johnson's dealings with Milton, it will be convenient to collect, from his written and oral works, some specimens of his opinions and tastes on poetry. It would

are those who think that he wrote the very best poem; and he certainly wrote some lines, which though far below the highest order of poetry, are yet true poetry. Everyone knows the conclusion of "The Vanity of Human Wishes." Perhaps Johnson's highest poetic expression was reached in those lines which he furnished as a conclusion to Goldsmith's "Traveller":

How small of all that human hearts endure  
That part which kings or laws can cause or cure.  
Still to ourselves in every place consigned  
Our own felicity we make or find.  
With secret course, which no loud storms annoy,  
Glides the smooth current of domestic joy.  
The lifted axe, the agonizing wheel,  
Luke's iron crown, and Damien's bed of steel,  
To men remote from power but rarely known  
Leave reason, faith, and conscience, all our own.

It is remarkable that Johnson was unable to see any great merit in the poets who were his contemporaries in middle and later life, except in Goldsmith. His praise of Gray's "Elegy," indeed, is generous, and his sincerity will not be doubted. But it is well known that, in certain moods at least, he decried even the "Elegy," which he once declared had but two good stanzas. He asserted that Dodley's collection of contemporary poems (which, at the date of the anecdote, already included the "Elegy," and Johnson's own Satires) contained no poem that "towered above the common mark." He puzzled Boswell and others by his failure to see anything in such a poet as Mason. It is stranger to us that he could write as coolly as he does of Collins, whom he had known and loved.

But it will not do to infer from this indifference that Johnson cared only for poems of sublime structure or of commanding human interest. We recall his admiration of Goldsmith's descriptive pieces; the subtleties of his sustained analysis of Cowley; his pleasure in Dryden's "wild and daring sallies of sentiment," in "the regular and excessive violence" of Dryden's wit; his delight in "the most attractive of all ludicrous compositions," "The Rape of the Lock," and his relish of "the clouded thoughts and stately numbers which dignify the concluding paragraph" of "The Dunciad."

Boswell was sometimes tempted to think that when Johnson showed insensibility to the beauties of certain versifiers, those beauties were "too delicate for his robust perceptions." But he is constrained to add that "when he took the trouble to analyze critically, he generally convinced us that he was in the right."

His reading of poetry was by common consent "grand and affecting." Mrs. Thrale protests that "it defeats all power of description; but whoever once heard him repeat an ode of Horace would be long before they could endure to hear it repeated by another."

Nor was his appreciation always calmly and placidly critical. "Such was his sensibility," Boswell tells us, "and so much was he affected by pathetick poetry, that when he was reading Dr. Beattie's 'Hermit' in my presence, it brought tears to his eyes." When he declaimed against devotional poetry, Mrs. Thrale used to remind him that "when he would try to repeat the *Dies iræ, dies illa*, he could never pass the stanza ending thus, 'Tantus labor non sit cassus,' without bursting into a flood of tears."

Johnson's admiration of Thomson is significant. Thomson wrote about the beauties of Nature (to which Johnson has been supposed indifferent), and in blank verse (which Johnson notoriously disliked). Yet it appears that it was Johnson who secured his admission to the collection of the Poets, from which the Booksellers designed to exclude him. His estimate of Thomson's poetry deserves to be quoted.

He is entitled to one praise of the highest kind; his mode of thinking, and of expressing his thoughts, is original. His blank verse is no more the blank verse of Milton than the rhymes of Prior are the rhymes of Cowley. His numbers, his pauses, his diction, are of his own growth, without transcription, without imitation. He thinks in a peculiar train, and he thinks always as a man of genius; he looks round on Nature and Life with the eye which Nature bestows only on a poet; the eye that distinguishes, in everything presented to its view, whatever there is on which imagination can delight to be detained, and with a mind that at once comprehends the vast, and attends to the minute. The reader of the "Seasons" wonders that he never saw before what Thomson shows him, and that he never yet has felt what Thomson impresses.

The attitude of Johnson to Milton is a matter of admitted difficulty. If we consider it in the light

his poetry, as a more and more and more and more, that Johnson was strongly prejudiced against the use, in poetry, of the heathen mythology, especially when mixed with Christian doctrine; and in particular against the pastoral convention. On the other side, when we come to Johnson's praise of "Paradise Lost," we shall be bound to keep in mind his theological interest and his profound piety. The "Paradise Lost" was a work which he could not but admire, even against his will.



It is worth while to examine in some detail the history of Johnson's relation to Milton. It began early. In 1750, when Johnson was still a young man, and still at heart a Jacobite—when his Toryism was still kept alive by his hatred of George II—he was deluded by a Scottish literary adventurer, one William Lauder; who by an impudent forgery had made it appear that Milton in his "Paradise Lost" had borrowed largely from the work of modern Latinists. Lauder's method was to interpolate, in the poems of Grotius and others, Latin translations of lines from "Paradise Lost," and to confront the result with Milton's English, in proof of plagiarism. The book is called "An Essay on Milton's Use and Imitation of the Moderns in his 'Paradise Lost.' Things Unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme." He dedicated it to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and induced Johnson to contribute a preface. Mark Pattison, in his "Life of Milton," describes Johnson and Lauder as a "pair of literary bandits," "conspiring to stamp out Milton's credit."

Let it be remembered that the subject of "Paradise Lost," and the poet's relation to his theme, were sufficient in themselves to command Johnson's respect. "Every line," he says, "breathes sanctity of thought and purity of manners." The end of the poem "is to raise the thoughts above sublunary cares or pleasures." Milton's "studies and meditations were an habitual prayer." The effect of Johnson's mind may have been so powerful as to silence prejudice and extort praise. But rational, respectful admiration for a great labor of piety does not seem to explain the sentences we have quoted; they ring

with the delight, the undying astonishment, that greets poetic greatness. It is not natural to suppose that the critic enjoyed the poem, was moved to eloquence by its poetical beauties?

When Johnson comes to the discussion of Milton's peculiarity of diction, he dismisses the doctrine that it should be imputed to his "laborious endeavors after words suitable to the grandeur of his idea."

The truth is that, both in prose and verse, he had formed his style by a perverse and pendant principle. He was desirous to use English words with a foreign idiom. This in all his prose is discovered and condemned; for there judgment operates freely, neither softened by the beauty nor awed by the dignity of his thoughts; but such is the power of his poetry, that his call is obeyed without resistance, the reader feels himself in captivity to a higher and a nobler mind, and criticism sinks in admiration.

Is not this language strangely like Dr. Bridges's on a very similar subject? Dr. Bridges tell us that Milton, by poetic magic, so transmutes the pedantic conventions, the "strange and meaningless" terms of "Lycidas" into beauty, that they do not "sound frigid or foolish in the poem." "Such is the power of his poetry," writes Johnson, "that his call is obeyed."

Johnson recounts briefly what he considers as the faults of "Paradise Lost," and adds that "he who can put them in balance with its beauties must be considered not as nice but as dull, as less to be censured for want of condor than pitied for want of sensibility."

These words, again, are strangely like those in which Dr. Bridges condemns their writer for his censure of "Lycidas."



We have now accumulated a mass of evidence which seems to support the view, commonly accepted, that Johnson was a man of more than ordinary poetic sensibility and power of critical discrimination. This is not a very high claim. We know that men of talents far inferior to Johnson's may, by the exercise of thought and imagination, qualify themselves to receive the pleasure which great poetry gives, and to judge the degrees of poetic merit. I advance a higher claim in urging that Johnson's

that Johnson's heart, as well as his head, was engaged in his love of poetry has also been shown; and the variety of his speculations on the instruments of poetry—diction, imagery, versification—proves that his interest in poetry was comprehensive. Finally I suggest that only a true perception, and an exceptionally vivid perception, of the poetic beauties of Milton can be held to have moved Johnson to a strain of eloquence which may itself be called poetical.

"It is time to return to "Lycidas" and the Poet Laureate, and to inquire whether Johnson's failure to admire that poem is indeed inexplicable on any other theory than that of sheer inaccessibility to poetic beauty; whether his dislike of "Lycidas" is enough to upset all probabilities; to nullify the verdict of his age and his own profession; to prove him the victim of a strange self-deception; to convict him of the insensibility which he pitied in others.

The Poet Laureate is, no doubt, familiar with those essays in which Walter Raleigh suggested that Johnson's strictures on Lycidas might admit of excuse, and even of some defence. Raleigh supposed Johnson to have come to "Lycidas" with strong prepossessions against the use of heathen mythology and the convention of pastoral elegy; prepossessions which may be forgiven if we remember some of the eighteenth century poems in which Johnson had been nauseated with crooks and pipes, with Delias and Neaeras; and of which it was certainly true that "where there is fiction, there is no passion." To this should be added that Johnson was shocked by the mixture, in "Lycidas," of "trifling fictions" with "the most awful and sacred truths, such as ought never to be polluted with such irreverent combinations."

Raleigh went beyond palliation. "Is there," he asked, "nothing artificial and far-fetched about the satyrs and the fauns with cloven heel? . . . Does the beauty and wonder of the poem derive from the allegorical scheme to which Johnson objected?" He went still further in his suggestion that Johnson may be right when he asserts that "Lycidas" "is not to be considered as the effusion of real passion; for passion runs not after remote allusions and obscure