

# What's the Matter with Literary Scholarship?

BY HOWARD MUMFORD JONES



Widener Library, Harvard University. "The tendency to think that books are born out of books instead of from imaginative experience and the haunting accidents of life is inherent in scholarly thought" . . .

UNDER the caption "What's the Matter with History?" Professor Allan Nevins recently lamented the passing of another thin and disappointing year in American historical writing. In the course of this analysis he remarked that "the most execrable specimens of literary criticism in print can be found in the *Journal of the Modern Language Association*." More careful scholarship would not have introduced this publication by a title which it does not bear, but I am interested in Mr. Nevins's complaint, because it points to a familiar confusion about the purpose of literary scholarship. Neither the association nor the periodical exists to produce literary criticism; they exist for the furthering of scholarship. Literary criticism is a matter of appraisal which may or may not involve scholarly knowledge; literary scholarship is a problem of intellectual knowledge which may or may not involve criticism. The answer to the question: "What's the matter with literary scholarship?" depends upon the kind of matter that one is looking for.

To justify its existence literary scholarship does not have to produce eminent critics, but it ought to produce eminent scholars. On the whole, it does not. The reasons are complex. Literary scholarship is at the moment suffering from two contradictory ailments: surfeit and exhaustion.

The amount of scholarship publication has now become so vast that the problem of bibliographies, finding lists, and the cheap reproduction of materials is the most pressing practical problem before the scholarly world. Not only are there annual bibliographies designed to cover the general field of the modern languages and literature, but each separate field—the Renaissance, Victorian literature, or the history of English-German literary relationships—has had to set up separate continuing bibliographies, to the preparation of which some scholars have had to give up most of their productive time. On any

important topic, author, or book the mass of scholarly material to be read through is disheartening, nor can it be swept aside with a gallant gesture, for the reason that no heap of chaff but contains valuable grain. The consequence is that he who embarks upon even so modest a project as the biography of a secondary author has to spend endless hours assembling a small library of references before he begins the painful process of taking notes. Contrast Dr. Johnson preparing the "Lives of the Poets."

So much for the surfeit. Now for the exhaustion. Until about 1910 literary scholarship in this country was reasonably certain what it was doing and why it was doing it. Following in the footsteps of classical philology and urged on by men trained in the German universities, literary scholarship was then in the broad sense philological. Its primary concern was with language—language as a field of investigation, language in the sense of establishing correct texts, language in the sense of attributing the right works to the right authors on internal evidence. This was the heyday of source-hunting, and the "parallel passage" school of thought was supposed to illuminate the literary imagination. So far as the practitioners of this method could then see, a bright, indefinite future lay before them, for there would always be more texts to edit, more parallel passages to hunt up, more authorial canons to establish.

But dissatisfaction arose. Fields became exhausted (for example, Anglo-Saxon literature now has few textual problems left). It was claimed by younger men that philology in this sense was heavy-handed, wooden-headed, and unenlightened. Dissidents clamored for a greater connection between literature and political, economic, social, or philosophical history, for social backgrounds, for "cultural studies" involving other arts, for the application of psychology to literary problems. As none of the revolutionaries tri-

umphed the chief result of the rebellion has been the disestablishment of the older method and the failure to put any common denominator of opinion in its place. As a result literary scholarship is at once puzzled and bankrupt. It is puzzled because it does not know where it is going, and it is bankrupt because it does not know why it is going there.

There is in mathematics, I am told, what is known as the principle of exhaustion. This is simply a method of continual subdivision, the resultant dividends growing smaller and smaller as they approach a limit. The principle of specialization in literary scholarship is like the principle of exhaustion. One is no longer an authority on modern literature, or even on English literature, or even on the Elizabethan period, or even on the drama of the Elizabethan period. One is known as a Marlowe man or a Webster man or even a "Hamlet" man. In the parlance of the profession So-and-so is then said to be "working" on such and such a defunct author. Perhaps the parallel to specialization in medicine is more exact, except that the literary scholar does not always resuscitate the patient. We are overwhelmed and exhausted by our knowledge.

To be sure, there is the opposite method of accumulation. Given time and space enough, the scholar may accumulate thousands of notes from thousands of sources and produce so encyclopedic a work as E. K. Chambers's "The Elizabethan Stage." Coöperative enterprise is sometimes successful, as will presumably be proved when the definitive text of Chaucer appears at the University of Chi-

## Next Week

### THE THIBAUTS

By ROGER MARTIN DU GARD  
Reviewed by Justin O'Brien

### THE YOUNG COSIMA

By HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON  
Reviewed by Marcia Davenport

cago under the editorship of J. M. Manly. Coöperative enterprise, however, is not always successful, as witness the unhappy "Cambridge History of English Literature" in fourteen volumes, some of the chapters by specialists, the rest by George Saintsbury. We have Professor J. L. Lowes's admirable "Road to Xanadu" for proof that individualism can triumph where coöperation fails. But no American scholar or pair of American scholars is apparently capable of producing a work so lucid and sound as the "History of English Literature" by the French savants, MM. Legouis and Cazamian.

In the modern languages (I cannot speak for the classics) there is not only an overproduction of scholarship, but an overproduction of scholars producing scholarship. This overproduction arises from the fact that Freshman English and an elementary modern foreign language course are universal requirements in the colleges and universities where the scholar is mainly found. To officer these courses a huge faculty is required—at the University of Illinois, for example, there are more people teaching English alone than there are members of the faculty of many a good freshwater college. These teachers do not wish to labor forever at elementary work, but to rise in the world they must follow Carlyle's injunction and produce, were it but the pitifulest infinitesimal fraction of a product. Hence the theses—five hundred or so a year; hence the articles in *JEGP*, *SP*, *PMLA*, *ELH*, *PQ*, and other learned quarterlies.

Literary scholars have, on the whole, been too proud to popularize. Up to about 1910 the better-class magazines were pleased to carry excellent essays on literary history by writers like Brander Matthews, Bliss Perry, George E. Woodberry, and other members of a more cultured and less professionalized generation. You will mainly look in vain for similar articles nowadays. The scholar, no longer desirous of making his basic ideas clear and attractive, loses himself in details. Moreover, when the gods go, the half-gods come in, and such literary material of this sort as now appears (how infrequently!) in the magazines is by amateurs or tendentious critics, whose errors annoy the scholar and confirm him in his belief that he is misunderstood.

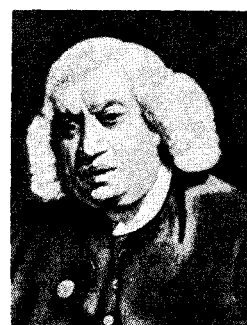
On the other hand, scholarship can point with pardonable pride to its textbooks. Both in the modern foreign languages and in English literature the textbook, whether for secondary school or college, is now an attractive, well-edited, informative, and agreeable volume. Scholarship does some of its best writing for its classes, because it is under the obligation to be simple, lucid, and agreeable.

It is, however, a commentary on literary scholarship that the most energizing new

element in the profession has come from a professor of philosophy. Now that departments of philosophy have mainly surrendered intellectual leadership in the field of general ideas to the social sciences, literature has become the chief vehicle through which value judgments about ethics, the nature of the man, and the meaning of the cosmos can be generally studied. Professor Arthur O. Lovejoy, who is technically a philosopher, by his insistence on the history of ideas as a common element in the humane subjects, probably offers the program around which the future of literary scholarship will be shaped. The history of ideas is a complex matter, best explained by Professor Lovejoy himself in the introductory chapter of his admirable "Great Chain of Being." Doubtless, like all reforms, it will be pushed to absurdity by enthusiasts, but the theory that the substance of literature is intellectual is so sound as to be tautological; the notion that we inherit a vast complex of value judgments, ethical concepts, preconceptions about men and women, and generalized ideas over and beyond those embalmed in the technical writings of metaphysicians is one of those discoveries so simple and true that it requires genius to make them. The pursuit of intellectual history, while not negating esthetic interests, breaks down the arbitrary distinction between literature and everything else—and it is from this arbitrary distinction that scholarship has been suffering. He who writes the history of ideas is perforce required to synthesize, a solution by necessity of the problem of scholarly writing which may lessen the amount of disparate and atomistic publication now being done.

The *fons et origo malorum* of the weaknesses of literary scholarship are probably the graduate schools. The graduate schools persistently refuse to follow the example of the law schools and the medical colleges, who, by rigidly refusing to admit merely mediocre students, have immensely elevated intellectual standards. In most instances, however, anybody with any sort of a B.A. degree can enter a graduate school somewhere, whether he is qualified for a scholarly career or not. He can also in most instances acquire some sort of a higher degree and in time increase the amount of useless information. Graduate schools are not opposed to brilliance, but they are tender of mediocrity with its white flower of a blameless life, with the result that inertia and the grade of B get hundreds of students so far along the path to the Ph.D. that it is cruel and unusual to cut them off at the last mile from this sweet fruition of an earthly crown.

It is, however, possible to grow too gloomy over literary scholarship. Its state was low in Alexandria; it was low in the Renaissance; it was low in the eighteenth century; and it is low now, if testimony contemporary with these epochs is to be believed. Horace's bore was probably an instructor in English, and Carlyle was not the first to complain of Dryasdust. He who will read a book about an eighteenth-century figure, published, let us say, in 1880, and then read a book about the same figure published in the last ten years, must be struck by the immense increase in pertinent knowledge, the greater insight, and the more liberal and sympathetic interpretation in the newer volume. Scholarship is at least historically minded. The bleak moral judgments passed by Victorian critics and scholars on their predecessors no longer end the



Samuel Johnson

matter. We know vastly more about Shakespeare or Balzac or Goethe than our forefathers did, and I think we read them more intelligently. We know more about international literary relations, we know more about the literary and publishing life of the past, we know more, and we realize more keenly, the relativity of critical judgments. We do not, to be sure, know any more about the psychology of the artist, and

probably the enduring weakness of scholarship is to forget the man behind the book. The tendency to think that books are born out of books instead of from imaginative experience and the haunting accidents of life is inherent in scholarly thought.

But our chief lack is eminent scholars. By this I refer to the inability of scholarship to stop picking up twigs and look at the tree. I think I reveal no diplomatic secrets when I say that the applications which come to the Guggenheim Foundation or the American Council of Learned Societies for aids to research in the way of money grants or fellowships are too frequently weak, pedantic, and unimaginative. There is little boldness, no broad grasp of the significance of a problem. The scholar needs to write fewer articles for the learned; he needs to plan out and write more books for the use of the cultivated but unprofessional reader. There is no reason in nature why another Leslie Stephen cannot appear to write another history of thought in the eighteenth century, why another Lockhart should not write another "Life of Scott," or why two Frenchmen should produce the only readable history of English literature that is at once solid, informative, and interesting.

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# New England Lotus-Land

WICKFORD POINT. By John P. Marquand. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1939. \$2.75.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

WITH "Wickford Point," it is obvious, our more heavy-browed literary critics are going to have to get out their pocket research-kits and start "placing" Mr. Marquand in the field of the American novel. And some of the rest of us are going to sit back and enjoy the fun. For Mr. Marquand has broken all the rules of the game.

I mean, the rules that are supposed to distinguish commercial from uncommercial writers. For, if you are what is known as a "serious" writer, you may do hackwork on the side. You may even become a best seller or a Nobel Prizeman. That is all according to Hoyle. But, if you start in by making money out of the larger magazines, you must stay in the commercial field and out of American letters under penalty of being hit over the head with a couple of bound volumes of Bronson Alcott. And you are required, by law, to ring your little bell on your way back and forth to your leper-colony, so that all high-minded souls will be warned to get out of your way.

Unfortunately, Mr. Marquand seems never to have heard of these distinctions. He began his career with an entertaining wig-and-rapier romance of colonial America called "The Unspeakable Gentleman." He has written an amusing life of Lord Timothy Dexter of Newburyport. He has been, for the last dozen years or more, a consistent and successful contributor of popular short stories and serials to the *Saturday Evening Post*. He is the creator of Mr. Moto—and also, of the late George Apley. And now comes "Wickford Point." Hasn't the man any sense of the critical proprieties at all?

The first question that most readers will probably ask is whether "Wickford Point" is "as good as" "The Late George Apley." The answer is that it is a different book. It isn't as good as "The Late George Apley" in the sense that it is neither as direct nor as compact as that beautifully precise dissection of a man, a class, and a way of American life. But it shows—to those who may need showing—that "The Late George Apley" was neither a sport nor an accident but the work of a man who writes of his own themes in his own way and writes of

them with a skill, a style, and a sense of acid comedy that may, perhaps, outlast a great deal of admired laboriousness and earnest breast-beating. In other words, here is a novelist—and a real one—with all that that word implies.

"Wickford Point" is the story of a long journey that keeps coming back to its starting-place and of the devastating power of a tradition from which the real life has departed. And the latter is one of the great New England themes—at least, south of the State of Maine. It was so in "The House of Seven Gables"—it is so here. Jim Calder is always trying to do something or think something reasonable about the Brills of Wickford. He



From "Massachusetts" (WPA Guides, Houghton Mifflin)

The House of Seven Gables: "The devastating power of a tradition from which the real life has departed . . . is one of the great New England themes" . . .

explores the past and the present—the pit from whence they were dug and the soft but tenacious clay that they have become. He goes back to Aunt Sarah, who rose at five every morning to read her self-taught Italian and called the pigs her "hairy doves"—to the dire and flatulent verses of John Brill, the Wickford Sage, who was almost a third-rate Alcott in the pale room of transcendentalism—to Great-Grandfather Seabrooke, the determined, active trader who yet fatally began the whole business by buying Wickford Point for his family. He goes forward with the descendants—with Cousin Clothilde, vague, charming, and satisfied with her own inner tranquillity, while her children go to pieces around her—with Harry Brill, who had gradu-

ated from Harvard and, having done that, was unable to do anything else; with Sidney, who kept making irrelevant tests of himself for an emergency that never occurred; with discontented Mary and beautiful, neurotic Bella, who wanted everything but ruined anything she had. There were the ancestors and there were the descendants. And the descendants could neither build upon the past nor escape from it. They could none of them go on like this and they knew it and kept saying it and still went on just the same—citizens of a lotus-land where the lotus had dried up long ago and only the languor remained, like a spell in the air.

I shall not attempt to describe the plot of Mr. Marquand's story. It is not a novel of plot but the story of the unavailing struggle of a group of characters against the soft fatality of the past. Jim Calder got away from it as much as he could and yet knew that, through life, he would be coming back to it, and to Wickford Point. Joe Stowe, who had been Bella's husband, escaped with wounds and yet with a certain hankering for return. And the end of the book finds Allen Southby, the synthetic Harvard pundit, taking his first genteel steps toward the morass.

This all sounds pretty grim and as if it had been written by William Faulkner. I apologize. You will go along with the story very easily and pleasantly. Some of the scenes—the description of the Wickford Sage—the reading of Allen Southby's dreadful novel—the entire appearance and character of Howard Berg—are written in Mr. Marquand's best vein of ironic comedy. But, for all that, the book is a study in spiritual dry-rot, no less skillful and compelling because it does not drag in the sheeted ghosts and the family curse. And it says a great deal for Mr. Marquand's skill that he has been able to retain the viewpoint of comedy, yet cut so deep.

There are criticisms to be made. I happen to think that Mr. Marquand could cut to advantage, particularly toward the middle of the story. The repetitive pattern, now and then, becomes merely repetitious and there is one reader, at least, who not only didn't like Cousin Clothilde but wasn't convinced of her charm. He is also frank to confess that the whole tangled poison-ivy patch of the Brill connection made him long for a flame-gun, here and there. Nevertheless, this is a notable and original novel, shrewd in characterization, richly quotable, and individual as all get out. I guess it really doesn't matter what a writer does first, as long as he happens to be a writer. And Mr. Marquand happens to be a real one.