

‘THE DISCIPLINE OF LETTERS’

A SOCIOLOGICAL NOTE.

IN the last number of *Scrutiny* we examined the university career of a peculiarly gifted man, the late A. C. Haddon, who combined the abilities of a specialist opening up a new field of knowledge with those of an exceptionally inspiring teacher. It was a career that could hardly be called successful by worldly standards. Chance has given us the opportunity to complete the findings by contrast: we may now inspect the record of a man whom in our time an ancient university has delighted to honour.

It must be said first that this collection¹ of the late George Gordon's letters, made by his widow, seems intended primarily to show that he was an affectionate relative and had many distinguished friends. It is what emerges incidentally that matters, for it is of course in his public and representative capacities, as professor of literature and of poetry, that we are concerned with him here. He has in fact no other importance, since there is, as the blurb tactfully puts it, a 'scarcity of more formal monuments to his learning and literary craftsmanship'.

Gordon was the able Scots student who collects Firsts and prizes by cannily directed industry. Coming from Glasgow as already a brilliant classic, after skimming through History and Greats he saw possibilities, as others have done, in the more recent department of English and transferred his attentions thither—English studies being, apart from the linguist's claims on them, notoriously the prerogative of your classic (generally of your not-good-enough classic). So he attracted Raleigh's attention by editing a typically academic collection of essays, *English Literature and the Classics*, to which he himself contributed a piece on Theophrastus; this, he wrote, convinced Raleigh that he would do for the English School. With Raleigh's backing he secured an English fellowship at Magdalen and managed before his fellowship ran out to land with it the Chair of English at Leeds, from whence he returned to succeed Raleigh as Merton Professor of Literature in 1922. In 1928 he became President of Magdalen, and subsequently Vice-Chancellor, but his merely academic offices, except as symptoms of success, are beside the point. We must note rather his election to the Oxford Chair of Poetry in 1934, his appointment to the original Selection Committee of the Book Society along with Walpole and Priestley (as to which he wrote 'I couldn't wish for better company'), his election to the various literary societies that carry social prestige, his undertaking a series of popular fifteen-

¹*The Letters of G. S. Gordon, 1902-1942 (O.U.P., 10/6).*

minute broadcast talks on great literature, his editing a selection of *Times*' third leaders, etc. In contrast to Haddon who achieved so much with so little public assistance, Gordon, in spite of every worldly opportunity in the way of financial endowment, social sanction and professional backing, has left nothing except a few published lectures and addresses. Nevertheless they have their interest and their place in literary history. For though they are not literary criticism they do give us an insight into the conditions which control literary studies in the universities and are therefore of the greatest value at this moment for us. For if any educational reform as a whole is to be achieved in this country after the war—and everything suggests that attempts in that direction will be made—it must centre on the universities, and there on the humanities. It is impossible to discuss such subjects in the air, without relation to the academic world which conditions them. And that sociology of the academic world which was desiderated in the last number of *Scrutiny* would certainly need to take note of the history of George Gordon. In contrast to Haddon, he was a green bay-tree specimen: what enabled him to flourish? What sources of satisfaction did he provide for his order? we must ask. We may conveniently start by examining his record with respect to literature. for sociology and literary criticism are mutually enlightening.

His chief productions are his two inaugural lectures, *The Discipline of Letters*, delivered before the University of Oxford in 1923, and *Poetry and the Moderns*, delivered in the same circumstances in 1934. Both are professions of belief, with a difference: between them the deluge had occurred, as far as literary criticism is concerned. As late as 1923 Gordon, who evidently lived in a literary backwater, was unaware of any challenge to what he stood for. The discipline of letters, he proclaims, is represented by the Oxford School of English. This is two-fold. On the one hand linguistic-philological studies as an end in themselves. On the other, scholarship—the ideal of perfect editing, that is, a frivolous one which is hostile to any real standards in literature, since any text long enough dead is equally meet to be edited, the credit consists in producing the perfect index etc. to a piece of writing not necessarily worth publishing in the first place. Or in Garrod's own words—and the jargon is characteristic—'In this University Mercury and Philologia, after many deeds of settlement (for the lady has been difficult) are partners, I hope, for life'. He followed this up by an attack on the Royal Commission's *Report on English*, apparently because that proposed that English should take the place traditionally occupied by classics, and should in short be taken seriously as an educational and cultural study. To take literature seriously, he declared, is 'an affront to life'. An inexplicable attitude for a Professor of English Literature to strike in his inaugural lecture? But before we look further into this extraordinary position we will attend his next public appearance on an almost identical occasion.

Poetry and the Moderns, eleven years later, reveals the for-

merly complacent academic uneasy; if he is dimly aware that he has not a leg to stand on, so to speak, he is still feeling around for a stance to maintain his self-esteem. We note he invokes for support his friends and predecessors Bridges, de Sélincourt, Garrod, Raleigh; with the like-minded to back him he takes up a position of superiority to what he cannot understand and feels as a threat to his prestige. The lecture is nothing but a series of appeals to his audience to respond in the cheapest way, he is out to capitalize the stock responses of the herd, he jeers in order to elicit sniggers of approval, and so on. The lecture is of course only memorable as one contribution to the academic war against contemporary poetry and literary criticism which, raging from about 1925 for a dozen years or more, will in a century or so no doubt become a subject for sanctioned literary research.² That campaign looks negligible now, but it was conducted with every expression of malice, misrepresentation and personal spite that the academic pen and tongue could command—the scholarly conscience having nothing to do with a critical conscience, or with any other kind, it would appear. We notice in Gordon's lecture that the focus of his ill-will is Mr. T. S. Eliot, and this was generally so, because as poet and literary critic Mr. Eliot represented a challenge which the 'lovers of a continuous literary decorum' could neither overlook nor hope to take up without disaster: some of them envied his success as a poet and all were jealous of his literary influence. Hence the choice of an attack on 'the moderns' as a subject for an inaugural lecture. But even in 1934 it was too late, the tide of public opinion had already turned. Even then Professor Claud Collier Abbott was editing the letters of Gerard Manly Hopkins (Oxford, 1935) with the implication that they were as important as Keats's—to value highly the poems of Hopkins was another way to incur academic odium, Bridges, in reluctantly and patronizingly editing them, having indicated the permissible degree of admiration. And when in 1937 Mr. Humphrey House, also of Oxford, produced an expensive edition of Hopkins's Notebooks and Trivia, in themselves of no particular interest, with all the panoply of scholarship including biographies of everyone mentioned in the text and biblio-

²Material will be found covering general as well as detailed aspects in the back numbers of *Scrutiny*. Other documents besides *Poetry and the Modern World* are John Sparrow, *Sense and Poetry* (1934); F. L. Lucas, *The Criticism of Poetry*, Warton Lecture 1933 and his contribution 'English' to *Cambridge University Studies* (1933); articles and essays by C. S. Lewis, Profs. Garrod and de Sélincourt, Logan Pearsall Smith, G. M. Young, Desmond MacCarthy, Humbert Wolfe, J. C. Squire and other contributors to the Sunday papers and literary weeklies of the period, and of course Dean Inge; papers read to the English Association and such literary societies; and a manifestation of the spirit of the campaign permanently enshrined in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (ed. George Sampson).

graphies of the MSS. etc., well, if the citadel had not actually fallen at least solidarity had been sacrificed. Or perhaps only consistency, for that section of the academic party which had put on record its opinion that any critic who thought Hopkins a considerable poet was thereby 'certifiable'³ was at least put out of countenance. But Gordon had an instinct against risking being caught out on a limb: he ends by manoeuvring into the favourite post-die-hard academic position. He ends with a profession, not this time of the Discipline of Letters (Mercury wedded to Philologia) but of broad-mindedness. He manages to put the critics he is attacking, instead of himself, in the attitude of intolerance by the usual trick of misrepresentation and even invention. We shall return to this later.

Altogether it is a curious history for a professor of English Literature and worth investigating. The *Letters* recently published illuminate it considerably. Gordon succeeded Raleigh at Oxford and was formed by him, so we must go a stage further back, to the case of Raleigh himself. For Raleigh was not only the first professor of English Literature at Oxford, he became a cult. His idiosyncrasies became the mould of form and his prejudices and prepossessions were standardized. We can see that while Raleigh made the Oxford English School he never took literature seriously, apart from its succubus, scholarship. He is an example of the most dangerous kind of academic, the man who hasn't enough ability to set up on his own as a creative artist and bears literature a grudge in consequence.⁴ His letters⁵ run on humorously about whatever poet he is writing on (Shakespeare, Blake and Wordsworth figure in turn as Bill)—the effect is to place himself on a level with them or whatever literary figure he writes about. His lectures seem to have been dramatic readings studded with epigrams. His professorial writings are all, implicitly or explicitly, about the inferiority of literature to life, an antithesis which he propagated continually, and he is seen perpetually anxious to show that he was not a don, not a professional man of letters, not a serious teacher of literature, (though he was quite willing to accept a comfortable living by undertaking to be all three).⁶ These characteristics, combined with a denigration of all literary criticism (which did not prevent him from publishing a number of books and resenting adverse reviews of them) when contrasted with his unquestioning

³F. L. Lucas, *Cambridge University Studies*, 'English'.

⁴The first literary critic, he wrote, was a eunuch, and literary appreciation is an emotion for spinsters.

⁵*The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh, 1879-1922* (Methuen, 2 vols.).

⁶The comparison that places Raleigh best is with Leslie Stephen. Though earning his living as a free-lance, having given up his fellowship on grounds of conscience, Stephen never wrote without having something to say and worth listening to, worked out a method of literary criticism on a sound basis, and respected his function. He has already been the subject of an article in this journal (Vol. VII. No. 4).

belief in the virtues of good-mixing in the best company, combine to make an unpleasant impression. A life devoted to teaching literature in this spirit is bound to become uneasy. By 1906 he was declaring 'I begin to hate criticism. Nothing can come of it', and he seems before then to have been conscious of the futility of his kind of English studies. 'If I am accused on Judgment Day of teaching literature, I shall plead that I never believed in it and that I maintained a wife and children' he wrote in 1921. This is an attitude by no means confined to Raleigh or Oxford, and is seen, characteristically, to produce a cynicism about the academic function that is, to put it in the lowest terms, unnecessary (readers may prefer a stronger adjective). It is not necessary to acquiesce, as the Raleighs do, on the ground that there is no alternative. 'We go to Glasgow about the 10th to get my ridiculous degree', he wrote once. 'I call it ridiculous because I have been in the kitchen where these things are cooked'. This is not a healthy scepticism, it is an excuse for taking a hand in the cooking as well as for benefiting by it. The next step is to make the Wodehouses free of the ridiculous degree.

This is Gordon's academic heredity. He shows what happens to ability when it is exposed to the atmosphere of classical studies pursued without any standards other than those of scholarship and of social snobbishness. One is not surprised to learn from his letters that the important things in life are (1) good mixing—a good man is one who likes a good dinner and knows the right people and (2) scholarship for its own sake. We see too that one corollary to the latter belief is that ability to edit a text is the only and sufficient test of academic fitness, hence the man who has edited any insignificant text is qualified to practice literary criticism and to direct literary studies. We see Gordon, through his letters, filling all the university posts he can, at home and abroad, with men who have proved their right to 'a senior post' by editing something, and with every conviction of righteousness spreading despair and blight on university students of English throughout the British Commonwealth. We see him believing, as he was taught by Raleigh, that the summit of achievement in modern English is represented by the writings of Charles Lamb and Robert Louis Stevenson—to write on Elia is 'the last test and pledge'; he is 'steeped in the *Letters* . . . I have read them for fifteen years; and the only fault I find in them is that they make all other Letters seem poor and thin. Even Stevenson must not be read till some time has elapsed; or he seems a green boy'⁷ (1920). The other great figure in this gallery is Johnson. I say figure because it is not Johnson's prose writings and poetry whose value is recognized, it is the club figure which can be used for purposes of solidarity (though of course Johnson's club and Johnson's personality were

⁷The whole of this letter (September 7th, 1920) should be read. He had written an article on Lamb by invitation for the *Times Literary Supplement* and is overcome at his temerity in accepting.

not of that kind). Lamb, Stevenson and Johnson evidently united to form an ideal centre⁸ and in so far as Gordon had any particular taste it was for mannered prose with a 'personal' content, while archaising and pastiches and light verse seem to have been the accepted form for academic *jeux d'esprit*. It was not incompatible with such tastes that he should have sponsored Sir Hugh Walpole's novels and P. G. Wodehouse, joined the former in his anti-highbrow battles, and have done his best to keep the academic world clear of the infection of modern literature. That he should reject the real poetry of his time while affecting to find virtue in the academic verse of Bridges also follows. It is not surprising either that he should believe that otherwise poetry has, so to speak, run its race: 'We still have our cellars, with all the old vintages from Chios to Chilswell'. Bridges's 'experiments'—academic tinkering with metrics and spelling, devoid of a personal rhythm—are the kind he can sanction, recognizing in them a respectable ancestry. In this Museum Milton is inevitably, as Leslie Stephen says he was even in Johnson's time, 'a tabooed figure' for criticism.

A bird's-eye view of the culture I have tried to describe is available in the form of an elegant little book of essays published in 1920, R. W. Chapman's *Portrait of a Scholar* (Oxford). Gordon wrote to the author when it appeared, 'I find in these essays not only something that has never been so well expressed, but the flower of a mode of life for you and me seven or eight years old'. Here we find essays on trivial subjects turned with that playfulness which so becomes a scholar ('Silver Spoons', 'Proper Names in Poetry') or serious ones treated in the style of Elia ('Thoughts on Spelling Reform' begins: 'I protest I know little of phonetics'). One is tempted to pause and Veblenize⁹ the spectacle. For instance, consider the significance of book-collecting in this culture—it has no more relation to literature than stamp-collecting, but carries a far higher *cachet* in respect to the greater income and esoteric knowledge needed. It would never occur to anyone in this group to refuse to acquiesce in such a merely conventional value, to question it even would be in bad taste. Spoons and furniture are valuable only if they are old, as certain books only because they are rare; hence contemporary poetry could not by definition be any good unless made on strict classical models and in every way reminiscent of them. Modern letters can only have value if they pretend to be old—Elia and R.L.S. will pass but never Dickens,

⁸How readily this abstraction of English literature could be assimilated with the classics is shown by another of the group, R. W. Chapman, who refers to 'the best odes of Horace, the best things in Boswell or Elia' (*Portrait of a Scholar*) in a significant context.

⁹I am reminded that this trope may not be understood, since Veblen's works are scarcely known in England. The reference is of course to his *Theory of a Leisure Class* in particular. An excellent introduction to and critique of his work is J. A. Hobson's *Veblen* in the *Modern Sociologists* series (Chapman and Hall, 1936).

who is deplored for lacking 'style'; the best living writers of English prose, we are told, 'having regard to their manner only' (!) are Bridges, Raleigh, Belloc, E. V. Lucas and Masefield, 'their prose is good because their models are good . . . seventeenth and eighteenth-century models [which they] have found adequate to the most exacting demands of their twentieth-century form and invention'. For such a group with such values and preconceptions a live contemporary use of language as that of a Hopkins or Eliot, the real art of a Conrad and Henry James, will fall on deaf ears, and the most genuinely witty, urbane and brilliant critic, Santayana, will make no impression.¹⁰ Real literature is necessarily closed to them, and they are aware of it only to resent it.

To look with Veblen's eyes at this 'mode of life', as Gordon rightly called it, is at least to make one point—that its social standards and its conventional literary and cultural values are only different aspects of the same mentality. To threaten its security in any way, by casting aspersions against the genuineness of a literary idol like Landor or Milton or by suggesting that the social structure needs revision, is to get the same reaction. Gordon's letters about the General Strike [that deplorable episode in the history of the universities when undergraduates in plus fours and fellows of colleges marched off in organized gangs to break the workers' strike] are almost unbelievable (see pp. 181-3). Particularly instructive is his gloating over the defeat of Labour and his savage jibes at the ecclesiastics who tried to exert a Christian influence over the middle-class (when the bishops called upon educational authorities like Gordon for support he told them to go to Hell). He concludes: 'We've had the Great Strike, and in some ways it's going

¹⁰Thirty-five years ago Arnold Bennett, then at the height of his powers as a creative artist, was remarking in *The New Age* 'the characteristic inability of the typical professor [of English] to toddle alone when released from the leading-strings of tradition'. 'For their own sakes' he continued, 'professors of literature ought to bind themselves by oaths never to say anything about any author who was not safely dead twenty years before they were born. Such an ordinance would at least ensure their dignity'. It was like Bennett's shrewdness to pick out this key weakness and correlate it with the defects of their professional writings. Raleigh, he declared, had not yet voiced criticism of his contemporaries: 'But wait a few years. Wait until something genuinely new and original comes along and you will see' for, says Bennett, look at the critical works he has already published—'They are as hollow as a drum and as unoriginal as a bride-cake; nothing but vacuity with an icing of phrases'. In 1911 he was complaining that there did not exist in English that body of criticism which the French artist has to cut his teeth on. For this purpose, he wrote, 'I have no hesitation in de-classing the whole professorial squad—Bradley, Herford, Dowden, Walter Raleigh, Elton, Saintsbury'. Reprinted in *Books and Persons*.

to be as valuable as the Great War . . . We shall feel the benefit of the public object lesson to Labour for the rest of our lifetime at least'. We notice that religion is conceived entirely as a social institution to which it is necessary to conform (of course one has one's children christened, and goes to Church sometimes because then you get better servants). This fury at the bishops who tried to implement the theoretical implications of the Established Church in an economic crisis exactly corresponds to the emotional reaction to literary critics who refused to play the game of letters and actually tried to replace the counters by real values. These forms of behaviour are just as much 'flowers' of that 'mode of life' as *Portrait of a Scholar*. This 'mode of life' has a vested interest in the profession of letters identical with its economic interests. A life devoted to the humanities means not following a vocation but taking up the genteelest profit-making pursuit, one which confers a high caste on its members; literary appreciation must obey the same laws as other expressions of social superiority.¹¹ The Discipline of Letters is seen to be simply the rules of the academic English club.¹² Only thus can we account for the curious spectacle of a professor of poetry and literature inaugurating his terms of office by insulting the greatest living poet (*Ash Wednesday* had appeared four years earlier) and decrying literary criticism, by denouncing State proposals to take seriously the study of literature as an educational process, and declaring that in his university at least literature should be studied only in its aspects of philology and scholarship, while post-graduate work should be restricted to learning to edit texts. The pusillanimity of the academic character outside the sciences is a matter of common experience, it is a product of the club spirit no doubt; so that when a Gordon gives tongue so boldly we may be sure he knows the whole pack is ready to yelp with him.

Clearly Gordon had this value for the society to which he belonged, that while he served as a public figure going through the motions expected of a scholar and a gentleman he was also a

¹¹The difference between a vested interest and the dispassionate pursuit of truth is shown by the contrasting behaviour of the humanists and the scientists when faced by similar situations. University schools of science and mathematics did not make fools of themselves about the revolutionary physics, for example, which were accepted without any display of feeling.

¹²A useful index to the constitution of this club is afforded by the prefaces to works of literary criticism and scholarship published in the last decade and a half. Tributes of gratitude therein express not real indebtedness but are advertisements that the author (1) knows eminent persons (2) wishes to exhibit solidarity with the right people. A third function may often be noted, that of disguising real indebtedness, where ideas, analysis, method or information have been lifted from the 'wrong' quarters to which it would be embarrassing to have to make acknowledgments.

mouthpiece for its instinctive attitudes of self-protection. What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed, was the academic reception of his *Poetry and the Modern World*. We noticed, in summarising this later inaugural lecture, how his position had changed from the complacent insolence of *The Discipline of Letters*. Now he would like to be on both sides at once, and though he cannot conceal his hatred of all that Eliot stood for he makes a great show of open-mindedness, as in extending cautious (but ludicrously indiscriminating) patronage to the young Oxford poets. Let us appreciate every dead poet equally (so long as we are not asked to think less highly of, say, Milton and the Romantic movement than we have always understood it to be correct to think), he says, and let us not take seriously any poet now alive (except to raise our hats to our classically-sanctioned Bridges and Housman).¹⁹ It is 'the literary groups now vocal' who exhibit 'narrowness and intolerance', he complains and ends on this rather plaintive note.

This was a cunning move, obviously more serviceable than the last-ditch foaming-at-the-mouth attitude. It kept pace with the quiet rattling that was occurring at this time on the Hopkins controversy, and inaugurated the shift of opinion about 'the modern movement' that was noticeable very soon after. For such a social group, though it does not move or alter essentially, has to modify its facial expression from time to time in order to survive. Take the affair of Hopkins, which we have outlined—by the time Mr. House had published the fruits of his scholarly labours what bad taste it would have been to suggest that they were superfluous! The critics, that is, had succeeded in persuading the great world that

¹⁹The sociologist would have to pay special attention to the place of Housman in this society. His claim to be in the Bentley tradition covered his pathological rudeness to other scholars, and as a scholar who had proved his devotion to the ideal by specializing in insignificant texts, he was permitted a degree of privilege otherwise unknown. His soundness in essentials was proved when he delivered the Rede lecture on 'The Name and Nature of Poetry'—its reception and the use made of it are of great interest. Another apparent exception to the general code of the academic order is Mr. C. S. Lewis, but the eccentricity of theoretical Christian fervour is permitted to him since he took care to show from the beginning that he held entirely conservative views on the real tests of conformity—Shelley, Milton, Wodehouse, university English studies, and 'modern' critics. He published a book of essays in literary criticism significantly called *Rehabilitations* where all these subjects are treated on orthodox lines. Another necessary test of conformity is represented by Bradley on Shakespeare: though he has been blown upon, some would say blown up, it is *de rigueur* to intimate respect for him by way of showing hostility to the school of Shakespeare criticism which has dared to question Bradley's assumptions and method, to replace the comfortably known by the alarmingly unfamiliar.

they were right about Hopkins and the academic club wrong, and Hopkins had become a classic in face of the club's persistent black-balling. [This is the mysterious process known in the text-books as 'having stood the test of time']. Hopkins had to be incorporated into the conventional pantheon. But if the club finds it politic to make concessions, it will only make them on its own terms. In the matter of Hopkins, Professor Abbott's introduction¹⁴ to the letters is a transparent example of its technique of accommodation without reconstitution. Hopkins could not be radically altered, because he was dead; he could only be misrepresented. A more recent instance is Lord David Cecil's *The English Poets* (Cresset Press, 1941) where Hopkins is linked with Patmore, the palm being given to the latter whereas 'Hopkins is difficult not for his thoughts but for his mode of expression'; conversely Bridges is jacked up by pairing him off with Yeats. The opposite process is used to write down Eliot who is dismissed in the same breath as Auden and Spender; the 'new school led by T. S. Eliot' is pronounced to be a dead end, while 'the main English tradition' in modern poetry, we are told, is kept going by 'Dorothy Wellesley and W. J. Turner' (who oddly enough edit the series in which Lord David's book appears), 'the Sitwells' and Ruth Pitter. It is obvious that these are not judgments of literary criticism but gestures of social solidarity—the only kind of criticism that isn't Bad Form.

But let us consider another example of this principle at work. One of the few entertaining spectacles in this last depressing decade has been that of the academics who had shown themselves most hostile to modern literary criticism recognizing that Eliot had achieved a lasting position in spite of them; but while desiring a place on the platform alongside him they couldn't afford to show too glaring an inconsistency. We may well ask how this came about. Mr. Eliot had in fact become respectable for extra-literary reasons (there is no greater proof of respectability than the clerical audiences drawn by *The Rock*), while his poetry and essays had won through to the general educated public on their own merits, assisted by the 'narrow and intolerant critics'. Thus the former literary Bolshevik (*ut* Dean Inge) became fit even to preside over the Classical Association. Mr. Eliot has accordingly become incorporated into the canon of accepted Literature—which must be accepted and may not be criticised; and those critics who only recently were outlawed for daring to insist that *The Sacred Wood* and *The Waste Land* were important are now rebuked by the same pens for venturing to disagree with later critical pronouncements of his. The academics, that is, have not changed their skins at all, merely camouflaged them. They still object, as they always have objected, to the practice of real literary criticism, which necessarily menaces their self-esteem and professional reputation. The sociologist would note that for them it is unforgivable to be too far ahead of public opinion; even after public opinion has caught up

¹⁴v. *Scrutiny*, Vol. IV, No. 2.

with, and forced the club to endorse, the discoveries of the pioneering critic, his original offence remains and he will bear always the stigma of harbouring dangerous views. Gordon's protective device has become the modern academic's wear.¹⁵ He does not deny that there may be something in latter-day writers, only, he says, we must be tolerant. This in practice means that you may acclaim Eliot's *Collected Poems* if you will do the same for *The Testament of Beauty*; you may be interested in Kafka and Conrad if you will grant that Wodehouse and Sayers are equally incomparable; you may take Eliot's literary criticism seriously only if you will allow Lamb's to be just as good. Well, isn't that a handsome enough offer?

No, for the literary critic and the educationist will insist that the question they must put to academic authority remains what it always was: are we or are we not to be allowed to apply real standards, to work with real values instead of currency-counters? Apparently the answer still is that we are not. It was Henry James who declared that 'The confusion of kinds is the inelegance of letters and the stultification of values'.

Gordon's death did not then mark the end of the epoch in academic literary history that Raleigh inaugurated. Every university school of English appears to have its Gordons, and they predominate. Mr. C. S. Lewis's programme for an English School and his defence of it¹⁶ does not differ from Gordon's *Discipline of Letters* sixteen years earlier, either in tone or content, nor did he seem aware of the damaging criticisms to which his assumptions and arguments are open. The book was warmly received in academic quarters, where Mr. Lewis was credited with brilliant wit and a powerful intellect, and from thence came assertions that a blow had been struck for the cause. A really up-to-date intellectual, combining the scholarly virtues with critical genius, had taken service under them, we were given to understand. If there had been the slightest indication of originality in Mr. Lewis's outlook or of criticism of the *status quo* in his programme, what outraged bellows would have come from that herd instead! We may conclude that the academic club will go on recruiting its kind so long as it has a stranglehold on appointments in nearly every university, and will continue to put up *à-la-mode* Gordons to maintain its supremacy.¹⁷ It is useless, we may deduce and must point out, for state schemes

¹⁵cf. *Tradition and Romanticism* by B. Ifor Evans (1940). Our reviewer (*Scrutiny*, Vol. VIII, No. 4) observed: 'The conventional taste of thirty or forty years ago had at least the merit of a consistent view of literary history . . . Your modern academic presents a confused and unhappy picture in comparison. While careful to show that he has outgrown the old prejudices, he nevertheless accepts no modern revaluation of the tradition, but tries desperately to make the most of all worlds'.

¹⁶*Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, 1939. The review in *Scrutiny*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, contains the relevant information and the appropriate criticisms.

of educational reform at the university level to be broached without considering the realities of the situation. The reforms must be directed to the right quarters.

We started by presenting a question: what does the academic world gain by endowing and countenancing a Gordon and snubbing and starving a Haddon? We can now see that it gains immediately in a psychological sense, because a Gordon enables a bankrupt and decrepit tradition to feel that it can not only stand on its legs but can actually hold up its head and cut a fine figure after all. Whereas a Haddon makes it uncomfortable, painfully aware of deficiencies and the possibility of having to return to the Button Mould. The existence on its doorstep of a Haddon becomes a reproach and therefore an intolerable nuisance. No wonder he had occasion to complain of the step-motherly behaviour of his Alma Mater. But in the long run, we may predict, it will be the Gordons who are the disability. An impatient revolutionary movement in education, the new order that is more than likely to follow the peace, will be tempted to send the whole system down the drain, not only the academic club but the humanistic studies that they have discredited. It would be hard to justify a claim that a university school of English, as described by Raleigh, Gordon, Mr. C. S. Lewis, is of value to the community or the individual. There is no future for an order that is incarnated in a Gordon; and it deserves the fate it has invited. But is it not possible to make some attempt to salvage English studies? The first step, clearly, is to take them out of the hands of the old-style academic who, in the name of the discipline of letters, bans any attempted interest by the young in the finest poetry and novels and the most profitable criticism of their own time while welcoming the corrupters of standards, and who forces on the student an intolerably arbitrary view of poetry and the history of our literature. And this is the more indefensible when we look into the authority on which this academic's claims to competence are based.

The claims are ultimately made in the name of the classical tradition, that your genuine humanist is the familiar classic, scholar and gentleman that the academic could once claim to be. When English schools were first formed, the classically-trained were the only academics available with which to supplement the philologists. But if the classic ever was the salt of literary criticism (the evidence for it seems totally lacking) that salt has long since lost its savour. It has long been untrue to imply that the personnel of the academic English club is made up of such legendary people. The caste privi-

¹⁷The sociologist would make some deductions from the terms in which the academic and higher reviewers hailed Mr. Geoffrey Tillotson's *Essays in Criticism and Research*. This appeared in 1940 with a preface elevating the claims of scholarship, followed by a number of essays designed to prove that it supersedes the critic's function. Our reviewer had occasion to point out that there are 'many insidious ways in which scholarship can become a mask for critical prejudice'.

leges of the classic, scholar and gentleman are now claimed, and the prejudices propagated, by those who are rarely the first, often have no real title to the second—and as for the third, perhaps that need not be discussed. The theory is one employed now by all sorts of intellectual incapables to disguise their inferiority. Though this is a process of evolution not unknown to the social historian, I believe, it none the less leaves its supporters in a weak position. And even if the theoretical claims are occasionally substantiable, is there not something more to be said, and urgently in need of saying, about the fitness of the classic for directing English studies? Gordon started with some natural endowment; his career seems to suggest that his training qualified him for nothing except the editing of classical texts. He could bring nothing but prejudices and an assurance of superiority to his new department, that air of saying gracefully something profound and final which disguises saying nothing, the style of *Times* third leaders and *Times Literary Supplement* leading articles which are notoriously the work of Greats products and their Cambridge equivalents. But how much more vicious when higher English studies are handled in the same spirit! Naturally enough, the believers in this kind of 'discipline' do not like the criticism that shifts something, the teaching that stimulates and matures.¹⁸ The natural reaction of the academic English club, so constituted, has been that since they are incapable of doing anything themselves as directors and producers of literary studies, nobody else shall if they can help it (they are quite willing to help each other to help it, an activity which the organization of the academic world, as one large club, is peculiarly fitted to promote).

The stultifying effect on English studies of such a régime has long been apparent. The moral is that English studies must be cut free from the classical-scholarly tradition in every respect and at every level; must point out firmly that the ability to edit texts and make piddling comments on them is no more qualification by itself for an English university post than a certificate of librarianship since it is an ability that can be readily acquired by quite stupid

¹⁸Raleigh wrote to D. Nichol Smith from Oxford (1904): 'They told me in Liverpool that it was all-important to spend weary hours on diminishing the incapacity of dull students. I did not contradict them, but I didn't do it: I wrote a book. No one who understands the real thing cares twopence about the dull student, except as a man and a brother. Drink with him, pray with him; don't read with him, except for money'. English in the universities has been a good deal run on these lines. Whether the dull student is not generally a product of this convenient practice, and whether his dullness may not disappear in more favourable conditions—a stimulating environment, good guidance, a suitable course of study and so on—is a question which hasn't as a rule been allowed to disturb the comfortable assumption (so unmistakably acted on) that students in general are dull. It is significant that a Haddon does not find himself surrounded by dull students.

people with no interest in literature; and recruit new blood from, and enter into new connections with, the live studies instead of dead ones. A new deal for English could be initiated at once on the basis of the experimental English college and courses that were long ago outlined in this journal. With the aid of the allied studies—other modern literatures, particularly French, and the social sciences (history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, but cultural history and sociology in particular)—new and uniquely equipped specialists would be turned out whose centre in literary criticism and training in the methods and disciplines of other specialisms would enable them to work further and further into adjacent fields of knowledge with the most fruitful results. And it would equip them to do the work which the mere scholar trained only to edit texts cannot do but which literary criticism must get done. And there is work which other specialisms—psychology, sociology, history—notoriously need done and which only the trained literary critic can safely undertake, work which is waiting to be done because no one who is not a literary critic, in our special sense, can undertake it at all. A simple example lies to hand, in Raleigh's literary remains. Raleigh had most of his life contemplated writing a book on Chaucer. He never wrote it, and we know why. 'The Chaucer has got only so far, that I have mapped out and defined a lot of things that I should like to know and don't. "What the philologists should tell us and don't", "What students of French poetry should tell us and don't";—these are hardly chapter titles' (*Letters*, 1903). Gordon, a much less intelligent man than Raleigh, characteristically comments (Preface to Raleigh's posthumous *On Writing and Writers*, 1926): 'They are the private chapter titles of more than one unwritten book on Chaucer nor can it well be otherwise while the tradition of his text remains uncertain'. Nor could it well be otherwise if the text were as certain as that of to-day's newspaper. What Raleigh wanted the philologist and the French mediaeval scholar to tell him was what only a literary critic could, who was incidentally a philologist and a specialist in early French poetry. Raleigh had come up against questions which no amount of scholarly information alone can determine, they can be 'settled' only by the methods of literary criticism. There is no good book on Chaucer's poetry because no first-class literary critic happens to have had sufficiently intense an interest in Chaucer to go to the immense trouble of acquiring the incidental specialisms and absorbing the masses of 'factual matter' that would equip him to decide *as a literary critic* the critical problems Chaucer raises. And until such a critic does there will not be the book on Chaucer we all need, let what Bentley of mediaeval studies there ever may be edit the text, or if the authentic text were suddenly revealed from Heaven. There is a similar difficulty about Donne—everyone has had the experience of consulting the great edition—for which we are all deeply grateful to Professor Grierson—and finding that there is no light thrown in the notes, the scholarly and textual notes, on our difficulties. This in my experience is true of all edited texts from the Elizabethan

dramatists right down to so apparently straightforward a specimen as Jane Austen's novels. The real difficulties of reading the text, the critical problems, seem to be outside the editor's province, or he is unaware of them because like most scholars he is not a literary critic, too often not even an intelligent reader. That Shakespeare texts cannot be finally determined by 'scientific' editing is now generally admitted. I don't mean that we should send scholarship packing—of course we can't do without it—but that we should insist that scholarship in the narrow sense is recognized for the tool it can only be and a useful tool only when in the right hands. 'I can hire mathematicians but mathematicians can't hire me' said Edison.

What English studies need then is not more scholarship but fresh contacts, cross-fertilization—a W. H. Rivers of the complex of cultural subjects of which the study of literature forms part, and the intellectual disciplines of which it can profitably draw upon to enrich its method. Failing his appearance, we can at least reorganize English studies on such a basis. Besides being educational in a real sense, so that English studies would be freed from that sense of futility so widely complained of by university students, it would give post-graduate and 'research' students a real field of useful work. And other studies would profit. But can anyone be so optimistic as to believe that any university reform less violent than a bloody revolution would make such a programme possible?

Q. D. LEAVIS.

‘LE MISANTHROPE’ (II)

V.

WITH Act II, Sc. ii, the work of exposition is complete. The stage is cleared and Molière brings his batteries to bear on the procession of vain, empty, frivolous courtiers who have nothing better to do than engage Célimène in malicious chatter or attend some small function at Court.

ACASTE

A moins de voir Madame en être importunée,
Rien ne m'appelle ailleurs de toute la journée.

CLITANDRE

Moi, pourvu que je puisse être au petit couché,
Je n'ai point d'autre affaire où je sois attaché.

It is noticeable that almost every word uttered by these people about their friends or in the bitter exchanges between themselves is double edged. It returns like a boomerang to the speaker. Acaste remarks complacently :

Parbleu ! je ne vois pas, lorsque je m'examine,
Où prendre aucun sujet d'avoir l'âme chagrine.

The implication is that the game of self-deception is so successful, that he is so shallow and empty that he is incapable of perceiving his shortcomings or experiencing the torment which afflicts Alceste. This becomes clearer in the brilliant portrait of the fop which emerges innocently as the speech continues :

Pour le coeur, dont sur tout nous devons faire cas,
On sait, sans vanité, que je n'en manque pas,
Et l'on m'a vu pousser, dans le monde, une affaire
D'une assez vigoureuse et gaillarde manière.
Pour de l'esprit, j'en ai sans doute, et du bon goût
A juger sans étude et raisonner de tout,
A faire aux nouveautés, dont je suis idolâtre,
Figure de savant sur les bancs du théâtre,
Y décider en chef, et faire du fracas
A tous les beaux endroits qui méritent des Has.
Je suis assez adroit; j'ai bon air, bonne mine,
Les dents belles surtout, et la taille fort fine.
Quant à se mettre bien, je crois, sans me flatter,
Qu'on serait mal venu de me le disputer.
Fort aimé du beau sexe, et bien auprès du maître.
Je crois qu'avec cela, mon cher Marquis, je crois
Qu'on peut, par tout pays, être content de soi.