

## SOCIOLOGY AND LITERATURE

*THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERARY TASTE*, by Levin Schücking  
(Kegan Paul, 7/6).

*ENGLISH SOCIAL HISTORY*, by G. M. Trevelyan (Longmans,  
21/-).

That 'spirit of the age' doesn't amount to much of an explanation where changes of literary taste are concerned, and that there are sociological lines of inquiry capable of yielding profit—in these suggestions one readily concurs: they are not new, and were not when Dr. Schücking's essay was first published in German, in 1931. And I cannot, after several re-readings, find substantially more to bring away from it. That anyone could write the most casual note relevant to Dr. Schücking's title without proposing any more definite inquiry than he does, or making any more of an attempt to distinguish between possible inquiries, is remarkable. But then, the apparent casualness of his whole procedure is very remarkable. He throws out the most vague of general suggestions and proceeds to demonstrate them with a random assortment of 'evidence' in this way (p. 10):

'Elsewhere, with the general understanding less, the conditions were still worse. Chaucer had his Visconti—the unscrupulous John of Gaunt. He ate the bread of a court at which French taste and the rather stale theories of love of past centuries were still accepted; and a good part of his literary activity ran on these lines. They still left room for the play of his sense of grace and elegance, his taste and wit and irony, but not for the real element in his popularity, his wonderful sense of the Thing as It Is, which made him at the end of his life the most vivid portrayer of the Middle Ages. But by then his relations with the court had probably grown far less intimate, and it may be that these descriptions were written for recital to an audience of burghers. Such examples might be multiplied'.

This kind of thing, of course, is not a use of evidence at all, and no amount of it can forward our knowledge or understanding of anything. If you are to conduct a profitable argument about the 'sociological medium of literature' you must have a more inward acquaintance with the works of literature from which you argue than can be got from a literary history or a text-book. There is indeed a most interesting and significant inquiry to be made into the sociological background of Chaucer, but it is of a kind that can hardly fall within Dr. Schücking's ken. It is what, in spite of the reference to 'the philologists', Raleigh suggests here (in one of the extracts from his lecture-notes published posthumously as *On Writing and Writers*—the one worth remembering):

'It is impossible to overpraise Chaucer's mastery of language. Here at the beginning, as it is commonly reckoned, of Modern English literature, is a treasury of perfect speech. We can trace his themes, and tell something of the events of his life. But where did he get his style—from which it may be said that English literature has been (in some respects) a long falling away?

What is the ordinary account? I do not wish to cite individual scholars, and there is no need. Take what can be gathered from the ordinary text-books—what are the current ideas? Is not this a fair statement of them?

"English was a despised language used by the upper classes. A certain number of dreary works written chiefly for homiletic purposes or in order to appeal to the humble people, are to be found in the half-century before Chaucer. They are poor and flat and feeble, giving no promise of the new dawn. Then arose the morning star! Chaucer adopted the despised English tongue and set himself to modify it, to shape it, to polish it, to render it fit for his purpose. He imported words from the French; he purified the English of his time from its dross; he shaped it into a fit instrument for his use".

Now I have no doubt that a competent philologist examining the facts could easily show that this account *must be* nonsense, from beginning to end. But even a literary critic can say something certain on the point—perhaps can even give aid by divination to the philologists, and tell them where it will best repay them to ply their pickaxes and spades.

No poet makes his own language. No poet introduces serious or numerous modification into the language that he uses. Some, no doubt, coin words and revive them, like Spenser or Keats in verse, Carlyle or Sir Thomas Browne in prose. But least of all great English poets did Chaucer mould and modify the speech he found. The poets who take liberties with speech are either prophets or eccentrics. From either of these characters Chaucer was far removed. He held fast by communal and social standards for literary speech. He desired to be understood of the people. His English is plain, terse, homely, colloquial English, taken alive out of daily speech. He expresses his ideal again and again . . .

Chaucer has expressed his views on the model literary style so clearly and so often, and has illustrated them so well in his practice, that no mistake is possible. His style is the perfect courtly style; it has all the qualities of ease, directness, simplicity, of the best colloquial English, in short, which Chaucer recognized, three centuries before the French Academy, as the English spoken by cultivated women in society. His "facound", like Virginia's, "is ful womanly and pleyne". He avoids all "counterfeited terms", all subtleties of rhetoric, and addresses himself to the "commune intente".

. . . Now a style like this, and in this perfection, implies a society at the back of it. If we are told that educated people at

the Court of Edward III spoke French and that English was a despised tongue, we could deny it on the evidence of Chaucer alone. His language was shaped by rustics. No English style draws so much as Chaucer's from the communal and colloquial elements of the language. And his poems make it certain that from his youth up he had heard much admirable, witty talk in the English tongue'.

Investigations of the kind suggested could be prosecuted—they are, indeed, likely to be conceived—only by a more sensitively critical reader of English poetry than most scholars show themselves to be, even when they are born to the language. A point that has to be made is that Dr. Schücking's dealings with German literature seem to be no more inward than his dealings with English. He certainly betrays no sense of not being qualified to deal with English, and his confident reference to Thackeray as 'the greatest English novelist of the nineteenth century' (p. 7) is representative. But if the critical quality of his approach to literature can be brought home in a quotation, this is perhaps the one:

*'The deepening of the cleavage between public and art through Naturalism.* The aesthetic movement in Germany was of no great importance. Of more note was the German movement of Naturalism. In Germany naturalism (or realism) came remarkably late. In France its most eminent representative, Emile Zola, had written his most famous novels in the 'seventies; he sought admittance to the Academy in 1888. About the same time (1886) Tennyson indignantly hurled his lame imprecations (now of great historic interest) in *Locksley Hall sixty years after* against the new movement, which had already had in the 'seventies a typical representative in Henry James. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was begun in 1874; Ibsen's *League of Youth* dates from 1869'.

It is bad enough to bracket the Tolstoy of *Anna Karenina* with Zola, as this passage seems to do. But to be capable of referring to Henry James as a 'typical representative' of Naturalism, or a typical representative of anything—what considerable conclusions are compatible with such an approach?

There can be no pleasure in elaborating this kind of commentary. Enough has been said as a preliminary to making the point Dr. Schücking's book provides an opportunity for making—the more suitable an opportunity because of the drive in sociology with which, in its English publication, it is associated. It is an elementary point, but one that seems unlikely to get too much attention as the Sociology of Literature forges ahead: no 'sociology of literature' and no attempt to relate literary studies with sociological will yield much profit unless informed and controlled by a real and intelligent interest—a first-hand critical interest—in literature. That is, no use of literature is of any use unless it is a real use; literature isn't so much material lying there to be turned over

from the outside, and drawn on for reference and exemplification, by the critically inert.

There are, indeed, many different kinds of possible sociological approach to literature and of literary approach to sociology, but to all of them the axiom just enunciated applies. To Dr. Schücking's offer it most patently applies. You cannot make changes in taste the centre of your inquiry without implicitly undertaking, as an essential part of your work, a great deal of perception, discrimination and analysis such as demand a sensitive, trained and active critic. You can, of course, collect some kinds of relevant material without being, critically, very deeply engaged: there is, for instance, the economic history of literature. (Dr. Schücking, by the way, doesn't mention Beljame's admirable book,<sup>1</sup> nor does he the work of A. S. Collins<sup>2</sup>). But as soon as you start using it in a 'sociological' handling of literature, as, for instance, in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, you are committed to being essentially and constantly a critic if your use of the information and of the literature is to amount to anything.

This is so, even if your concern is primarily with the conditions of the literary market—so long, that is, as your concern is with the effect of these on literature. And any serious inquiry into changes of 'taste' (a more complex and less delimitable field of interest than perhaps Dr. Schücking realizes) tends inevitably to develop into a consideration of the most radical ways in which the use of individual talent is conditioned—into the kind of inquiry, for instance, suggested above into the art and language of Chaucer. Everyone interested in literature must have noted a number of in-

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<sup>1</sup>*Le public et les hommes de lettres au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, by Alexandre Beljame. Dr. Mannheim would be conferring a service on the world if he published a translation of this book in his new Library. It has been out of print for decades. To bring it up-to-date shouldn't be a very formidable task.

<sup>2</sup>Nor does he appear to know Courthope's *History of English Poetry* or Leslie Stephen's *English Literature and Society in the XVIIIth Century*, both of which are half-a-century old. Leslie Stephen's classic is brief and modest, but in the ready fulness of ordered knowledge and with the ease of a trained and vigorous mind he really *does* something; something as relevant to Dr. Schücking's confused and ambitious gesturings as this suggests: 'Briefly, in talking of literary changes, I shall have, first, to take note of the main intellectual characteristics of the period; and secondly, what changes took place in the audience to which men of letters addressed themselves, and how the gradual extension of the reading class affected the development of the literature addressed to them'. The possibilities of a 'sociology of literary taste' are incomparably better presented by Leslie Stephen's book (written late in life as lectures, which he was too ill to deliver, or to correct for publication) than by Dr. Schücking's inconsequent assortment of loosely thrown out and loosely thought adumbrations.

quiries of that order asking to be undertaken. It is an order of inquiry that, properly undertaken, would pre-eminently justify a 'sociology of literature'; but it could hardly propose itself except to a mind taking the most inward kind of critical interest in the relevant literature. That a German scholar should miss it where Chaucer is concerned is not surprising. That Shakespeare, though Dr. Schücking makes a great deal (relatively) of the Elizabethan theatre as a sociological theme, shouldn't propose it to him brings home more strikingly the disability of an external approach. This suggests fairly enough all the significance he sees (p. 12):

'New fields lay open. An infinitely wider sphere of activity showed itself. Literature was written no longer with an eye to the approval of a particular aristocratic patron, who might easily demand, in consequence of his conservative outlook, that traditions should be respected; and the work of the artist was no longer directed by a small and exclusive social group, whose atmosphere was the breath of his life. The artist depended instead indirectly on the box-office receipts, and directly on the theatre managers who ordered plays from him.

'But in the theatre the works that won applause were precisely those which through their closeness to life and their realistic psychology were bound to be foreign to the taste of the aristocratic world. Thus the shackles of tradition could here be struck off and a wealth of varied talents could find scope'.

What wealth of 'sociological' interest presented by Shakespearean drama and the Elizabethan theatre has been missed here there is no need to insist; this is a field that has had much attention in recent years. Its significance for an understanding of the nature of a national culture and of the conditions of vitality in art will not be quickly exhausted. There are other fields less obviously inviting attention and offering less obvious rewards. There is that marked out by L. C. Knights in the paper printed in the present number of *Scrutiny*—one to which it is very much to be hoped that he will devote a book. If it is asked of such an inquiry whether it is primarily sociological or literary it will be enough to answer that it represents the kind of sociological interest into which a real literary, or critical, interest in literature develops, and that, correlatively, the sociologist here will be a literary critic or nothing.

For to insist that literary criticism is, or should be, a specific discipline of intelligence is not to suggest that a serious interest in literature can confine itself to the kind of intensive local analysis associated with 'practical criticism'—to the scrutiny of the 'words on the page' in their minute relations, their effects of imagery, and so on: a real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn; the adjective is not a circumscribing one. On the other hand, a living critical inwardness with literature, and a mind trained in dealing analytically with it, would have improved much work undertaken in fields

for which these qualifications are not commonly thought of as among the essential ones, if they are thought of as relevant at all. Here is a passage from a distinguished historian—one distinguished among historians for the humane cultivation he brings to his work (he is, moreover, discussing the quality of English civilization in the seventeenth century):

‘Since thought among common people had now reached a momentary perfection for the purposes of religious and imaginative literature, the English language was for those purposes perfect. Whether in the Bible, the play-book, the street ballad, the broad-sheet or report of the commonest dialogue of daily life, it was always the same language, ignorant of scientific terms, and instinct with a poetical feeling about life that was native to the whole generation of those who used it. Its fault, corresponding to the state of thought in that age, is want of exactness and of complexity in ideas, that renders it unfit for psychology or for close analysis of things either material or spiritual’.

A footnote to this paragraph runs:

‘If Mill or Darwin, Browning or Mr. Meredith had tried to express their ideas in the English of the seventeenth century they would have failed. The extreme simplicity of Hamlet’s thought is only concealed by the obscurity of his motives and the richness of his poetical diction’.

G. M. Trevelyan’s *England Under the Stuarts* (which I re-read with gratitude at fairly frequent intervals—the quotation comes from page 54) was written, of course, a good many years ago, and literary fashions since then have changed in ways calculated to help, in respect of the particular point, a similarly cultivated writer who should embark on a similar undertaking. Nevertheless, the passages are sufficiently striking: the appreciation of seventeenth-century civilization that goes with them is clearly a seriously limited one. And one would be agreeably surprised to find a historian who was essentially any better provided with the kind of qualification under discussion.

On the same author’s recent *English Social History* I have heard the comment that it is disappointing in that it does little more than add to some economic history that almost every educated person knows some information about English life that any educated person has gathered, and could supplement, from his acquaintance with English literature. Whether this is a fair comment or not (and the book was clearly designed for a given kind of public—it belongs with that higher advertising of England which has employed so many distinguished pens of late), it is certain that a social historian might make a much greater, more profound and more essential use of literature than *English Social History* exemplifies; a use that would help him to direct his inquiries by some sharper definition



of aims and interests than is represented by Mr. Trevelyan's account of 'social history' in his *Introduction* :

'Social history might be defined negatively as the history of a people with the politics left out'.

Positively, we have :

'But social history does not merely provide the required link between economic and political history. It has also its own positive value and peculiar concern. Its scope may be defined as the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages : this includes the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and of leisure, the attitude of man to nature, the culture of each age as it arose out of these general conditions of life, and took ever changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought'.

A social historian who appreciated the nature of the vitality of the English language and of English literature in the seventeenth century—and such appreciation itself leads to sociological inquiries—would, in defining and developing his interests, be sensitized by more positively and potentially realized questions than any that have given life, form and significance to *English Social History* : questions as to the conditions of a vigorous and spiritually vital culture, the relations between the sophisticated and the popular, and the criteria by which one might attempt to judge the different phases of a national civilization. To say this is not to envisage with complaisance a habit of naïve comparative valuation. But social history will have shape and significance—will have significant lines and contours—only so far as informed by the life and pressure of such questions; and as intent preoccupations it is towards comparative valuation that they press, even if they actually issue in none that is explicit, definitive and comprehensive. What, as a civilization to live in and be of, did England offer at such and such a time? As we pass from now to then, what light is thrown on human possibilities—on the potentialities and desirabilities of civilized life? In what respects might it have been better to live then than now? What tentative conception of an ideal civilization are we prompted towards by the hints we gather from history? It is with such questions in mind—which is not to say that he will come out with answers to them—that a social historian, in so far as his history is anything more than an assemblage of mechanically arranged external information, must define the changes and developments that he discerns. Some such questions were no doubt in Mr. Trevelyan's mind. But they hadn't a sufficient concrete charge; they were not sufficiently informed with that kind of appreciation of the higher possibilities of a civilization which, in the earlier book, would have made it impossible for him to pronounce that the English of the seventeenth century was inadequate to the complexities and subtleties of Brown-

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ing and Meredith, or to suggest that one has disposed of the language of Shakespeare in saying that 'the extreme simplicity of Hamlet's thought is only concealed by the obscurity of his motives and the richness of his poetical diction'.

Mr. Trevelyan, as I have said, is distinguished among historians by his general culture. But his use of literature is nowhere more than external (see, *e.g.* his use of Chaucer in *England in the Age of Wycliffe*): he knows that literature exists—it nowhere amounts to evidence of much more than that. The possible uses of literature to the historian and the sociologist are many in kind, and all the important ones demand that the user shall be able, in the fullest sense, to read. If, for instance, we want to go further than the mere constatation that a century-and-a-half ago the family counted for much more than it does now, if we want some notion of the difference involved in day-to-day living—in the sense of life and its dimensions and in its emotional and moral accenting—for the ordinary cultivated person, we may profitably start trying to form it from the novels of Jane Austen. But only if we are capable of appreciating shade, tone, implication and essential structure—as (it is necessary to add) none of the academically, or fashionably, accredited authorities seems to be.

On the other hand, the understanding of literature stands to gain much from sociological interests and a knowledge of social history. And this is an opportunity to mention, for illustration, Mr. Yvor Winters' *Maule's Curse*,<sup>3</sup> a book that should have been reviewed in these pages, seeing how few good books of literary criticism appear. In it Mr. Winters, by relating the key American authors with the New England background and the heritage of Puritanism, throws a truly revealing light on their work and on the evolution of American literature. Perhaps it may be possible to revert more adequately to the book in a later number of *Scrutiny*.

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<sup>3</sup>New Directions: Norfolk, Conn., 1938.



