

THE PLACE OF THE BOOK OF LUKE IN LITERATURE

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To those of us who have been accustomed to think that Biblical writing, or Biblical style if you will, attains, in its kind, close to perfection, a recent dissenting note from Mr. J. Middleton Murry fairly constitutes a challenge to defend. It certainly forces us with right good will to question the almost unanimous testimony of judges of good writing, of literature, that the Bible is one of the world's literary masterpieces. For, Mr. Murry says that "a great part of the historical books of the Old Testament, the gospels in the New, are examples of all that writing should not be"; and, further, "that the following proposition must be accepted in any consideration of style: *The Life of Jesus*, by Ernest Renan, is, as a whole, infinitely superior in point of style to the narrative of the Authorized Version of the Gospels."¹

The conventional estimate of the literary merits of the Bible, I suppose, hardly needs any illustration. I am tempted, however, for purposes of contrast, to quote several expressions of opinion. "Priests, atheists, sceptics, devotees, agnostics, and evangelists are generally agreed," says Professor Phelps, "that the Authorized Version of the English Bible is the best example of English Literature that the world has ever seen. . . . The art of English composition reached its climax in the pages of the Bible."² Walter Pater³ refers thus to the greatness of the literary art of the Bible: "It is in the quality of the matter it informs or controls, its compass, its

¹ *The Problem of Style*, p. 135.

² *Human Nature in the Bible*, pp. IX and X.

³ *Appreciations*, p. 36.

variety, its alliance to great ends, or its depth of the note of revolt, or the largeness of hope in it, that the greatness of literary art depends, as the Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, Les Misérables, The English Bible, are great art." "The English Bible," says Frederic Harrison,¹ "is the true school of English Literature. It possesses every quality of our language in its highest form—except for scientific precision, practical affairs, and philosophic analysis. It would be ridiculous to write an essay on metaphysics, a political article, or a novel in the language of the Bible. But if you care to know the best that our Literature can give in simple, noble prose—mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Holy Scriptures in the English tongue." And quite recently,² the Honorable Stephen Coleridge compares the Authorized Version of the Bible with the Bible in Modern Speech to illustrate the immense difference between "what is noble and fine in style and what is poor and third rate."

Alongside these critical estimates, place Mr. Murry's statement about the style of certain books of the Bible, and we have a point of departure for an impartial study of the qualities of Bible writing. For the purpose of such a study let us take what is generally admitted to be the most literary of the Gospels, the Book of Luke. What are the literary qualities of this story of the life of Jesus? Are we justified in saying that this gospel is good writing? Or, to ask a bold specific question, "Is the King James Version of the Book of Luke a Masterpiece of English Literature?"

Much as we should look with suspicion upon superlatives in literary criticism, and particularly with respect to the Bible, about which there has been so much loose writing and careless talk, we cannot do better in a literary study of the Book of Luke than to start with Renan's

¹ "On English Prose," *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. 43, p. 492.

² *The Glory of English Prose*, p. 9.

now famous statement that "C'est le plus beau livre qu'il y ait"¹—the most beautiful or, shall we say, the finest book that has ever been written. What did Renan mean by these words? He used the phrase *le plus beau* intentionally; there is no doubt about that. He spoke of the Gospel of St. Matthew as the most important book that has ever been written, "le livre le plus important qui ait jamais été écrit"; and followed this statement by the equally significant remark about Luke. Let us have before us the significant parts of Renan's comment:

"L'Évangile de Luc est le plus littéraire des Évangiles. Tout y révèle un esprit large et doux, sage, modéré, sobre et raisonnable dans l'irrationnel. Ses exagérations, ses invraisemblances, ses conséquences tiennent à la nature même de la parabole et en font le charme. Matthieu arrondit les contours un peu secs de Marc; Luc fait bien plus; il écrit, il montre une vraie entente de la composition. Son livre est un beau récit bien suivi à la fois hébraïque et hellénique (prologue) joignant l'émotion du drame à la sérénité de l'idylle. Tout y rit, tout y pleure, tout y chante; partout des larmes et des cantiques; c'est l'hymne du peuple nouveau, l'hosanna des petits et des humbles introduits dans le royaume de Dieu. Un esprit de sainte enfance, de joie, de ferveur, le sentiment évangélique dans son originalité première répandent sur toute la légende une teinte d'une incomparable douceur. On ne fut jamais moins sectaire. Pas un reproche, pas un mot dur pour le vieux peuple exclu; son exclusion ne le punit-elle pas assez? C'est le plus beau livre qu'il y ait. Le plaisir que l'auteur dut avoir à l'écrire ne sera jamais suffisamment compris."

Renan seems to be viewing here comprehensively the elements which make for literary effectiveness—the theme, the spirit of the work, the skill of the artist; the matter and the style; the thought or the idea and the expression.

But as we consider Renan's appreciative comment in our attempt to determine the literary qualities of Luke's Gospel, let us not lose sight of two important considerations: First, Renan based his statement on the beauty or significance of the Book as it was presented to

¹ *Les Évangiles*, Calmann-Lévy, Éditeurs, Paris, pp. 282-83.

him in the language of the original. Now admittedly the King James Version of this book has a marked literary flavor of its own; different surely from that of the Greek original, and—what is a very rare occurrence in a translation—possibly superior to it. With this noble English version before us we might very easily attach more importance than did Renan to the medium of expression considered, if it is possible, as a thing apart from the subject matter. Or, to express it in another way, Renan may have found the distinctive beauty of the book in its theme, its material, and its spirit, rather than in the medium of expression.¹ And, second, Renan, regarding, as he did, the great central figure of the Gospel solely as a human personality, certainly did not have the emotional predispositions which most Christians of today would bring to this story of the life and work of Jesus. His judgment of the literary value of the Book might therefore be much sounder than ours, might be, we may say, more disinterested. Mr. Murry has said ² that “the emotional susceptibility of the reader will vary with the degree of his belief”; and also that “one who believes in the divinity of Jesus will be more profoundly affected by the gospel narratives than one who does not.” This theory is manifestly inapplicable in the case of Renan than whom no other seems to have felt more intensely the essential beauty of what was to this gifted French

¹ From a different point of view but with what might seem to be an identical conclusion, Mr. W. F. Adeney (*The New Century Bible, Luke*, Introduction, p. 3) comments on the significance of this book: “Appreciative readers of the New Testament have no desire to bring that volume, or any part of it, into competition with the *Symposium* or *Phædo*, with *King Lear* or *Hamlet*. Its claims on our regard are to be found in other regions than those assigned to the philosopher and the poet. But if the beauty of a book lies deeper than grace of diction, strength of thought, wealth of imagination—if we take into account the spirit of a work as well as its form, its subject as well as its style, the moral and spiritual phases of the beautiful as well as the sensuous and the intellectual, the claim for this gospel to be the most beautiful of all books (Renan) may well be regarded as unapproachable.”

² *The Problem of Style*, p. 132.

critic the marvelously effective story of the life of an ideal human character.¹

To Renan this "beauty" of the book lay first and last in the spirit of the work. This spirit is embodied in its central figure, idealized in words and deeds as they are presented to us by a deeply sympathetic follower, who at the same time was a conscious literary artist. "The book," says Renan, "is a splendid story well worked out. . . . He [Luke] writes; he shows a true intent of composition. Over the whole legend is cast a shade of an incomparable sweetness."

But, still says our English critic, "the gospels . . . (in the Authorized Version) are examples of all that writing should not be"; and "*The Life of Jesus* by Ernest Renan is, as a whole, infinitely superior in point of style to the narrative of the Authorized Version of the Gospels." Whether or no it may be at all possible to harmonize what seem to be such widely divergent views, we ought to know what Mr. Murry conceives style to be. Here follows, I think, the gist of his opinion:

"A true style is a completely adequate expression in language of a writer's mode of feeling. . . . Style is a quality of language which communicates precisely emotions and thoughts, or a system of emotions or thoughts, peculiar to the author. . . . It is the expression that is inevitable and organic to an individual mode of experience, an expression which, even when this exact relation has been achieved, rises or falls in the scale of absolute perfection according as the mode of experience expressed is more or less significant and universal—more or less completely embraces, is more or less adequate to, the whole of our human universe. . . . Style is perfect when the communication of the thought or emotion is exactly accomplished; its position in the scale of absolute greatness, however, will depend upon the comprehensiveness of the system of emotions and thoughts of which the reference is perceptible."

¹ The comment of Lafcadio Hearn (*Books and Habits*, p. 93) may also not be unapropos: "Some persons have ventured to say that it is only since Englishmen ceased to believe in the Bible that they began to discover how beautiful it was."

This is, I think we shall all admit, an admirable definition of "style"—that is, if this is what we conceive style to be, and if we are content to use the word only in this sense. In this sense, I, for one, agree with Mr. Murry that Renan's *Life of Jesus* is infinitely superior in style to the Book of Luke. But, two questions are at once to be asked. Do we think of style only as an adequate expression in language of a writer's mode of feeling? Is it to be thus limited and particularized in meaning? and further, Does our acceptance of the superiority in style, in this sense of the word, of, say, Renan's *Life*, carry with it the inferiority of, say, the Book of Luke as literature? To both questions, I should answer, No.

With the more or less well established uses of the word "style," we are all familiar. We hear, for instance, of an American style.¹ Mr. W. B. Yeats refers thus to "an English style": "If somebody could make a style which would not be an English style, and yet would be musical and full of colour, many others would catch fire from him, and we would have a really great school of ballad poetry in Ireland."² And there does seem to be a certain intangible flavor or prevailing characteristic in the writings of the Bible to which we attach the term "Biblical style." Then we must recognize the different interpretations or meanings of the word "style" that have been aptly used by different critics in their evaluations of the qualities of literary art. I enumerate a few of such meanings, or definitions as they may be called, overlapping and not mutually exclusive, but indicating in the main, different points of view: "Adequate exact expression"; "effective expression"; "personal expression" ("style est l'homme même," or "sa manière de s'exprimer"); "superficial beauty, the beauty of the

¹ Sherman, S. P., "Have We a Style That Is Recognizably American?"—*Bookman*, November, 1922.

² *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 1.

fabric"; "permanent literary expression"; "a certain absolute and unique manner of expressing a thing, in all its intensity and colour"; "the fusion of the personal and the universal, the complete realization of a universal significance in a personal and particular expression."

The Book of Luke would answer readily to some of these defining phrases; it will not fit in with Mr. Murry's definition. Consider it as an illustration of any one of these definitions, and we have made little progress toward a just evaluation of its literary qualities. For even admitting, for the moment, that the Book of Luke has no "style," we should all agree that Luke's story of the life of Jesus is far greater as literature than is Renan's *Life of Jesus*, the "style" of which Mr. Murray has put on so distinguished a plane. But neither this generalization nor any attempt to judge the book on the basis of "style" will suffice. On a broader, sounder basis of the kind of writing to which it belongs and of the special characteristics which this kind of writing displays, we shall be able much better to answer the question, What are the literary qualities of the Book of Luke?

The Book of Luke is a masterpiece of popular biographical literature personalized by the touch of a conscious literary artist. It is in its essence popular biographical narrative; literature of the people, if I may use this phrase without any of the implications which accompany it if used to indicate a theory of composition. The material is to a certain extent common property; known practically to all of that little group of Christians of the first century for whom Luke consciously put together what he regarded as the essential facts in the Life of Jesus. True, this is Luke's own working over of the material which was a common possession of the people. But the author, even in this most literary of the gospels, counts for little. The deeds of a great idol of the people,

handed down by word of mouth, or transmitted in writing, are here collected, and brought into proper relation one with the other.

This popular biographical narrative of Luke is personalized, given literary distinction if you will, by the touch of the conscious literary artist. Luke has a plain unvarnished tale to tell. He tells it directly. He used none of the imagery of the poets; none of the subtle interpretive characterizing of the psychologist: he merely tells us what Jesus said and did, and how what he said and did influenced his little world about him. Here is fact unfused by the imagination. Rather it is fact spiritualized, vivified, by emotion, the emotion of one who has seen or heard and felt; it is fact breathed upon by the gentle spirit of the lover of the ideal of human character as incarnated in the person of Jesus. Luke's story is an illustration of Mr. Woodberry's statement¹ that "biography succeeds best when the subject of it and the circumstances of his life and the events of his career are described with the closest approximation to imaginative method so that he lives and is seen with the clean vitality of characters in a novel." It is as a beautiful revelation of the ideal in human life that this Book of Luke may be classed as a masterpiece of biographical literature.

The Book of Luke is then to be judged as a bit of popular biography. It is simple, straightforward biographical narrative, presented in a form that would appeal to the audience whom Luke addressed, an audience of whom Theophilus stood as an exponent, an audience, we may assume, which was unliterary, unlearned, unintellectual, but emotional, devoted, and responsive to a plain setting forth of the ideal character of their Master. Different fundamentally from other kinds of biographical literature is this Book of Luke; from Renan's

¹ *The Appreciation of Literature*, p. 147.

Life of Jesus, as I have before said, a view, an interpretation, proceeding from the reflective studies of a modern critic, and addressed to a learned audience; or from Strachey's *Queen Victoria*, an intimate life story of the great Queen, made significant by the intelligent criticism and appraisal of a gifted thinker and essayist; or from Bryce's *Biographical Studies*, which are, I suppose, in their almost purely expository aspects and in their intellectual appeal the farthest removed from Luke's simple narrative.

It is popular story. Place Renan's *Life of Jesus* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* in a class by themselves; and over against these works of fine literary art, place the simpler stories, the Book of Luke and Sir Thomas Malory's romance of King Arthur: and we shall have a not inadequate conception of the place in literature which Luke's old story should occupy. In both Luke and Malory, the material, the method, and the manner, or in other words the parts played by the compiler and composer are, *mutatis mutandis*, identical. Each book is a great work of popular story, perfected by an individual, a literary artist. But how different from Renan's *Life* and Tennyson's *Idylls*, we have but to read to realize.

For both Renan and Tennyson are at the farthest removed from men like Luke and Malory. Luke and Malory assemble, select, arrange, and give a certain amount of unity to material which may be thought of as being in the common possession of the people, and which they as writers are content to transmit in, may we say, a sublimated form. They do not invent; they do not interpret; they do not let this old material pass through the successive distillations which produce finally the finished, pure individualized essence. Renan and Tennyson have focused on their material the intense spiritual rays of their inmost consciousness. They have presented to us their "story" in "language which communicates precisely emotions and thoughts . . . inevitable and

organic to an individual mode of experience." In each of these two groups of writers, however, the medium of expression was appropriate and adequate to the purpose, the audience, and the moment.

And as now we come back finally to the King James Version of the Book of Luke, we feel that here, in its kind, we have a superb piece of literature; maybe the best of its kind that we have in the world's literature. It is good writing. For in it subject matter and expression are so fused together as to produce in English-speaking people the emotion of supreme beauty. It is thus a masterpiece of English Literature.