

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

I.

THOMAS WARTON

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THOMAS WARTON represents the history of English poetry, and, more particularly, of English poetry in the Middle Ages—that being the chief part of his study in the volumes he has left behind him. His name is rightly chosen to inaugurate those studies in this Academy, to give an example, from the eighteenth century, of some things which can hardly be bettered at the present day. However much may be erroneous and how much defective in his published work, there is in it, throughout, an example of historical studies springing from a fresh and genuine love of the pursuit.

It may be confessed at once without disguise or palliation that Thomas Warton did not come up to the requirements of a modern University. He was a college tutor all his life, and his method with his pupils was simply and openly to discourage their attendance at lectures. I wonder whether the Academy remembered this when they determined to set up his name and image in their hall as an ancestor to be respected. We might be open to some criticism, in these days of University reform, for choosing an idle Fellow, the editor of the *Oxford Sausage*, a lover of ale and tobacco and low company in taverns, to be commemorated in this way as an authority. Oxford in the eighteenth century is a favourite shocking example, and Thomas Warton in his neglect of his pupils did little, seemingly, to contradict the prevalent opinion about the inefficiency of Oxford teaching at that time. But we were reminded lately by Mr. Dicey, speaking of Blackstone (a friend of Warton's), that the dispraise of Oxford may be overdone; 'the apathy or somnolence of Oxford in the eighteenth century has been the subject of exaggeration'; among the idlers there were some adventurers, who used their leisure in a right Academic way. Blackstone of All Souls and Warton of Trinity are enough to make the censurers reconsider and modify their estimate of those quiet generations of University life.

It is not very difficult, though it takes some time, to collect the principal dates about the study of the history of poetry. It was part of the literary criticism which followed the Renaissance. Sidney writes the history of English poetry in his *Apology*. It was also part of antiquarian research. Rymer, the editor of the *Foedera*, gives an intelligible short account of old French and Provençal poetry, as an introduction to English poetry, in one of his essays on the Drama. An entry in his table of contents may be worth remembering as a convenient summary of English poetical history:—

‘Chaucer refin’d our language. Which in perfection by Waller.’

Abroad, the connexion between antiquarian and literary history is shown more brilliantly by Muratori in some of his essays on the Antiquities of Italy and in his book on the Perfect Italian Poetry. One is inclined at first to keep the antiquarian studies of men like Hickes and Hearne apart from the modern interests of Dryden, Addison, or Pope. But as a matter of fact there was no distinct separation between the antiquities of literature and such modern questions as were discussed in Dryden’s prefaces or in the *Spectator*. Rymer had ambitions as a wit and a lively writer; and on the other hand Sir William Temple, the paragon of elegant literature, is ready to notice the discovery of old Scandinavian heroic verse. He quotes the Death-song of Ragnar Lodbrog in his essay *Of Heroic Virtue*; he calls it a sonnet:—

‘The whole sonnet is recited by Olaus Wormins in his *Literatura Runica* (who has very much deserved from the commonwealth of learning) and is very well worth reading by any that love poetry, and to consider the several stamps of that coin according to several ages and climates.

I am deceived, if in this sonnet, and a following ode of Scallogrim . . . there be not a vein truly poetical, and in its kind Pindaric, taking it with the allowance of the different climates, fashions, opinions and languages of such distant countries.’

It was from Sir William Temple that Thomas Warton the elder (the father of Thomas and Joseph Warton) got the suggestion and matter of his Runic Ode, published in the posthumous volume of his Poems in 1748:—

‘A Runic Ode taken from the second volume of Sir William Temple’s *Miscellanies*: *Argument* Regner Lodbrog, a King of one of the Northern Nations, being mortally stung by a Viper, before the Venom had reach’d his Vitals, broke out into the following verses.’

Here the elder Warton merely translates the two stanzas quoted in Latin by Temple. A more surprising specimen of the good understanding which seems to have obtained between the antiquarians and the modern men of letters is to be found in the *Poetic Miscellany* which was begun by Dryden and continued after his death by the publisher, Jacob Tonson. In the sixth volume, published in 1716, 'the sixth part of Miscellany Poems, by the most eminent hands,' there is another Runic Ode (though it is not called by that popular name), and this poem, the *Waking of Angantyr*, is taken bodily from Hicke's *Thesaurus* and printed in the original Icelandic—

*Waknadu Angantyr,
Vekur thig Hervor—*

with Hicke's prose version, and no attempt to modernize it or even to explain. Such was the courage, or the temerity, of publishers in those days. The editor of the *Miscellany*, it must be said, was plainly negligent and hurried. He has kept the original Latin heading as he found it in Hicke, now torn from its context and unintelligible as it stands. But this very absurdity makes the contrast all the more remarkable between this Northern poem in its old Northern tongue and the other pieces printed by Tonson in this volume. They are not all of the newest, it should be said; this *Miscellany* includes Bishop Corbet's 'Ballad intituled *The Fairies Farewel*' as well as more modern things like *The Campaign* by Mr. Addison and the *Pastorals* of Mr. Alexander Pope.

The contemporaries of Dryden and Addison, it is clear, did not keep separate the antiquarian and the literary study of poetry. No more than Sir Philip Sidney were they ashamed to speak of the poetry of barbarous nations or of their own Gothic ancestry. Sir William Temple has been already quoted. Another significant thing is the little book that was printed at the Oxford press in 1691 containing the macaronic *Polemo-Middinia*, attributed to Drummond of Hawthornden, and, in black letter, the old Scottish poem of *Christ's Kirk on the Green*.

A Scot will fight for Christ's Kirk on the Green :

—when this was written by Pope he was thinking of Allan Ramsay, whose vigorous revival of old Scottish poetry had already gone far. But Allan Ramsay was not the first to print it, nor was it a mere national prejudice that gave importance to this old comic rhyme. It was published at Oxford by E. G. apparently as a philological diversion and a poetical curiosity. The preface, dated on New Year's Day, explains that it is meant for the Saturnalia and for laughter. The study

of burlesque is justified in an historical argument, with reference to the examples set by Homer, Erasmus, and Rabelais; particular attention is given, of course, to Merlinus Coccaius, as the original pattern followed in *Polemo-Middinia. Quod felix faustumque sit Reipublicae Iocoseriae*. The notes are full of Teutonic philology, Icelandic and Gothic etymologies set out by the help of the Oxford press with its founts—not yet exhausted—of various type, including even runes, and the alphabet of Ulphilas. The Edda of Snorro Sturlæus, Gawain Douglas's *Aeneid*, and Chaucer are frequently quoted. The Marriage of Wit and Learning, of Mercury and Philology, was not broken in those days.

Perhaps, after the Pantagruelist levity of the *Polemo-Middinia* and its preface, it may comfort the Academy to remember that E. G., the author of this philological lark, was Edmund Gibson, afterwards Bishop of London. It is remarkable how many Fathers of the Church have been nursing-fathers of mediaeval learning—Huet, Bishop of Avranches, in his discourse on the origin of Romances, followed by Warburton, controversially, on the same subject; Hurd in his essays on Chivalry; Percy. Along with these names Bowle should be remembered—'el reverendo Don Juan Bowle'—the editor and commentator of *Don Quixote*, to whom Thomas Warton was indebted for several mediaeval notes in his edition of Milton. If witnesses to character are required, these names are warrant enough for the reputation of mediaeval studies.

The importance of those literary researches in the eighteenth century is that they were part of a great reaction, not peculiarly romantic or mediaeval, against one of the products of the Renaissance. The great use and meaning of them was that they were *history*. History was what was wanted to provide matter and substance for the intellect to work on. In the Revival of Learning, from the first, there had always been a danger of formalism—a loss of substance for the sake of perfection in style, an economy of studies to ensure perfection within limits, instead of the limitless endeavour of Browning's Grammarian. There was a nobler motive than the mere admiration for style which tended to keep some of the leaders of the new learning from plunging into absorbing researches. It was felt that the Humanities, to be really profitable, must take regard of the conditions of human life. The enormous schemes of education propounded by Rabelais and Milton show the spirit of the Renaissance in its greatest ambition—the spirit of Marlowe's Faustus. Another mode was presented in the *Utopia*, where the aim of study is not infinite knowledge, but just so much as may be available for the

lives of ordinary men. The quality of it is carefully chosen, the range restricted, so that the whole nature of a man may be in good training—not burdened by superfluous knowledge nor distracted from the chief end of life by interests which no life can exhaust. *Utopia* is the nobler counterpart to Browning's *Grammarians*—not the contrast as Browning gives it:—

This small man goes on adding one to one,
His hundred's soon hit—

but another sort of man, whose study is so proportioned and arranged that every moment of it is alive, everything in the day's work contributing to the meaning and value of the day.

There is danger in this limited humanism—danger of exhaustion and barrenness. But in the lifetime of Rabelais, Ben Jonson, Burton, and other such extravagant readers the danger was averted. The danger came at the end of the seventeenth century, with the loss of energy which Dryden noted in a famous passage, on the two periods of English drama, before and after the Interregnum:—

Our age was cultivated thus at length,
But what we gained in skill we lost in strength;
Our builders were with want of genius curst,
The second temple was not like the first.

In this second age, though there was endless and increasing scientific industry of every sort, there was a distrust of science among the chief men of letters. It is seen, curiously, in Samuel Butler, who is in so many things a man of the older fashion; it is seen most eminently in Swift. *Anima Rabelaisii habitans in sicco*; Swift might also be described as the spirit of Sir Thomas More without his hopefulness; the ideal of Swift, as given in the *Second Voyage of Gulliver*, is pure *Utopia* in its choice and its limitation of studies. Or Swift might be thought of, again, as Bacon in his negative and critical aspect, his contempt of fallacies and futilities—if one could think of Bacon punishing the follies, without wishing for the advancement, of learning.

The Renaissance worked itself out in one direction to a sort of thin culture or polite literature which found substantial erudition much too laborious and expensive. Bentley was scoffed at by people with very scanty furniture of their own. Some of the most famous men of that time are light in material knowledge, at least so far as is shown in their writings—Berkeley, for example, as compared with Hobbes before him or Hume after him. The great difference between Berkeley and Hume is that Hume wrote the *History of*

England. Even Dr. Johnson, who has so much of the old-fashioned regardless love of reading, makes little use of it in his works, apart from the *Dictionary*; his depreciation of history and historians is well known. But it was from history that fresh supplies had to be drawn, to save polite literature from dying of inanition; and supplies of this sort were given by Thomas Warton in his *Observations on Spenser*, in his *Milton*, and above all in his *History of Poetry*. He was not afraid to plunge, and he was not too careful about form. The *History of English Poetry* was censured for its want of method. But method may be bought too dear, when there is a want of material; and method may be applied, when sufficient material is found. Warton had to work hard to make his way among the manuscripts of the Bodleian and Lambeth, the British Museum, and the Colleges of Oxford and Cambridge. No doubt he took all the help he could get, and owed much to his advisers and coadjutors; but with all allowances he had still more than enough to do. The main thing wanted was a report on the extant works, and that was what he gave. Method, after all, is far less required in literary than in political history. The political historian has to extract the essence from masses of documents that in themselves are unmeaning. The historian of literature deals with documents which in themselves are intelligible, which have, or which at any rate were by the authors of them thought to have, an immediate, present, independent value, quite apart from their bearings on other things or the inferences that might be drawn from them. Literary history is more like a guide-book than a geography. It may be amusing in itself at a distance from the realities of which it speaks, but it is not properly effective until it brings the traveller on his way, so that he sees for himself the temples and towers and mountain passes with his bodily eyes. Some historians of literature go wrong and spoil their work by writing as if their matter were all past, like the events of history; treating plays and poems like battles or sieges or constitutional reforms, to be described indirectly by a reconstructive gentleman in his study, doing his best to explain what he cannot see. Some part of literary history no doubt is busied conjecturally with epic poems and others which (as Paulin Paris said) have the misfortune not to exist. But the main part of it deals with extant things, which live for the present day when the seeing eye falls on them; they are unjustly treated when they are kept by the historian at a distance from the eye, as unrealized though permanent possibilities of sensation. That was not Thomas Warton's policy. As well as he could, he put for-

ward the results of his explorations in large samples, and he was right. Those who read his history see and know a good deal of old poetry at first hand; and those who find what they want will not be troubled at the careless profusion of the show. There are many mistakes, no doubt, which Ritson the accuser was ready to fix upon. But they do not really damage the general character of the book. There are omissions and failures. It is a pity that Warton should have slighted the ironical grace of the dispute between the Owl and the Nightingale, that wonderful anticipation of Chaucer in a rustic thirteenth-century dialect. It is strange that he never found the Cottonian MS. *Nero A. x*, with the *Pearl* and *Sir Gawayne*. But these are accidents.

It seems that Warton deliberately refused to be methodical or philosophical. A scheme of the history of poetry had been drawn by Pope, divided like the history of painting into schools. Gray, who took up the subject after Pope, and who resigned it to Warton, would have put into it more order and construction than his rambling successor.

I cannot here go further without a reference to Mr. Courthope, who has finished what Pope and Gray intended, what Warton did, in part, so well; and I take leave here, in the first *Warton Lecture*, to offer our Fellow the congratulations of this Society on the accomplishment of his task—a vote of thanks which I imagine might well be ratified by the Parliament of Birds, in their own *Paradise*.

The history of poetry, even when, like Warton's, it is random and informal, is part of history at large. It has its inconveniences and limitations; it can never be a harmonious work of art, like Gibbon's history, just for the reason already given, that works of art are what it deals with, and that art and literature are living things which assert themselves against the historian and cannot be made into mere matter for a narrative. Nevertheless the history of literature, like political history, is part of the memory of the world; it is philosophical, like the history of philosophy itself, a record of fashions of thought, of ideas. Thomas Warton, who took up the history of Gothic architecture as well as poetry, had a knowledge of the past life of England most ample, fresh, and variegated. He took an honourable share in that business of historical investigation which was itself the most important new fashion of thought in the eighteenth century. Partly through the store of new matter that it provided for the 'reading public', partly through the zest and enthusiasm of its students—the spirit of adventure, which is the same in Warton as in Scott—it did more than any theory to correct the

narrow culture, the starved elegance, of the preceding age. It is not to be forgotten that Johnson, who was disrespectful to history in general, and, occasionally, unkind to Warton, became himself an historian of literature in his *Lives of the Poets*.

Warton's historical work began in admiration, particularly of Spenser and of Milton's early poems. This, like Joseph Warton's critical work also, was due to their father. Thomas Warton the elder had discovered the early poems of Milton, in the volume of 1645, when as yet there were few to praise them. (As late as 1782, Joseph Warton in his essay on Pope speaks of Milton's 'smaller and neglected poems'.) The neglect and the recovery of them is described by Thomas the son in the preface to his edition of 'Poems upon several occasions, by John Milton'. This is one passage:—

'My father used to relate that when he once at Magdalene College Oxford mentioned in high terms this volume to Mr. Digby the intimate friend of Pope, Mr. Digby expressed much surprise that he had never heard Pope speak of them, went home and immediately gave them an attentive reading, and asked Pope if he knew anything of this hidden treasure. Pope availed himself of the question: and accordingly we find him soon afterwards sprinkling his *Eloisa to Abelard* with epithets and phrases of a new form and sound, pilfered from *Comus* and the *Penseroso*.'

The work of Thomas Warton as a commentator was very largely the tracing of resemblances and possible borrowings—an estimate, in detail, of the reading and book-learning of Spenser and Milton. But it is more than an essay on what is called in so many German professional treatises the *Belesenheit* of authors. Nor is it like the work of those 'parallelists' (the word is Warton's own) who 'mistake resemblances for thefts'. It is a liberal interpretation of the minds of the poets, through their reading. Warton justifies himself, modestly and sensibly, at the end of his chapter 'of Spenser's imitations from old romances'.

'Many other examples might be alledged, from which it would be more abundantly manifested that our author's imagination was entirely possessed with that species of reading, which was the fashion and the delight of his age. The lovers of Spenser, I hope, will not think that I have been too tedious in a disquisition which has contributed not only to illustrate many particular passages in their favorite poet, but to display the general cast and colour of his poem. Some there are, who will censure what I have collected on this subject as both trifling and uninteresting; but such readers can have no taste for Spenser.'

Without admiration, Warton's work would not have been done; and the same may be said of Joseph Warton's exhilarating criticism.

This is even more remarkable, inasmuch as he praises the work of Pope with no mean or ungenerous exceptions or cavillings, while at the same time he refuses to take 'acute understanding' as a substitute for 'creative and glowing imagination'.

The brothers Warton make the same distinction as Hurd in his memorable phrase, between 'good sense' and 'fine fabling'. Thus Thomas Warton in his note on *Comus*, ver. 195, *O thievish Night*: 'In the present age, in which almost every common writer avoids palpable absurdities, at least monstrous and unnatural conceits, would Milton have introduced this passage, where thievish Night is supposed for some felonious purpose to shut up the stars in her dark lantern? Certainly not. But in the present age, correct and rational as it is, had *Comus* been written, we should not perhaps have had some of the greatest beauties of its wild and romantic imagery.'

This gives the same antithesis as Joseph Warton puts at the beginning of his essay on Pope, in the dedication to the Reverend Dr. Young, Rector of Welwyn in Hertfordshire. His aim is 'to impress on the reader that a clear head and acute understanding are not sufficient alone to make a Poet'—'that it is a creative and glowing imagination, *acer spiritus ac vis*, and that alone that can stamp a writer with this exalted and very uncommon character, which so few possess, and of which so few can properly judge.'

Joseph Warton goes much further than Thomas. He speaks of Dante's 'sublime and original poem', 'which abounds in images and sentiments almost worthy of Homer, but whose works he had never seen.' Thomas Warton admires Dante too, but is more apologetic—'this wonderful compound of classical and romantic fancy, of pagan and Christian theology, of real and fictitious history, of tragical and comic incidents, of familiar and heroic manners, and of satirical and sublime poetry. But the grossest improprieties of this poem discover an originality of invention, and its absurdities often border on sublimity. We are surprised that a poet should write one hundred cantos on hell, paradise, and purgatory. But this prolixity is partly owing to the want of art and method; and is common to all early compositions in which everything is related circumstantially without rejection, and not in those general terms which are used by modern writers.'

'General terms' is the eighteenth-century prescription for a good style. Joseph Warton will not have it, and what he says might have been said by the young men whose watchword was *hierro*, and who fought the great battle of *Hernani* in 1830. One sentence may be enough: 'Among the other fortunate circumstances that attended

Homer, it was not one of the least that he wrote before *general* and *abstract* terms were invented.' There is much else to the same effect. The brothers are not of one mind about poetic diction, and Thomas is the more old fashioned of the two.

But it does not matter for the success of his work; and the moral seems to be that it is possible to study mediaeval literature and get much good from it without being exorbitantly romantic—again a consideration for an Academy. To study the Middle Ages it is not necessary to be mediaeval, in the sense of any 'romantic school'. Gray was not, Scott was not, nor were the other workers in this country from the time of Percy and Warton onwards—Tyrwhitt, Ritson, Price (the editor of Warton, too little known), George Ellis, Leyden. Peacock's Welsh antiquities in the *Misfortunes of Elphin* show how mediaeval studies may be followed out by a detached ironical mind. The great French scholars who have done most for the history of mediaeval literature have worked, like Gaston Paris, with a clear light; while on the other hand the romantic artists do not require the learning of Scott. Victor Hugo did without it, and built his mediaeval inventions out of the most casual reading; he did not know as much as Dr. Johnson about the books of chivalry.

What is to be the future of these studies? Where is advance to be made?

For one thing, it is becoming plain that more languages are required. We are under the curse of Babel; those who speak of the glory of poets sometimes forget how narrow and provincial is the fame of most of them, how broken and impeded by differences of language, as compared with the painters and musicians. But that is no reason why the sons of learning should refuse the difficulties; and for mediaeval studies all the tongues are needed. Old Irish and Welsh cannot be kept separate from Icelandic and Provençal, if the mind of the Dark and Middle Ages is to be understood. Nor are those studies merely antiquarian. Let us remember Whitley Stokes; I have no right to speak of his work, but I am proud to think that I knew the man himself, and I know both how he attended to other languages besides the Irish on which he spent his life, and also how he flashed with pleasure at the smallest proof that anything in his work could be made to bear on the living imagination of the present day.

For another thing, much may be done to clear away some literary prejudices about the Middle Ages—for example, those in Lowell's essay on Chaucer. His sentences there on the Provençal poets and their German contemporaries are probably the worst criticism ever written; he has warned many young ingenuous people away from

those regions of poetry with his brisk and complacent slander. He turns from Provence to Germany, to the land and the time of Walther von der Vogelweide, and what he has to say is *Tedeschi lurchi*, 'German gluttons'. 'On the whole it would be hard to find anything more tediously artificial than the Provençal literature, except the reproduction of it by the Minnesingers. The *Tedeschi lurchi* certainly did contrive to make something heavy as dough out of what was light, if not very satisfying, in the canorous dialect of Southern Gaul.' It is hard to speak of this as it deserves; to do so might require another quotation from Dante at the end by way of apology: 'È cortesia lui esser villano'. It may be enough to use once more the immortal words of *Sartor Resartus*: 'All which Propositions I, for the present, content myself with modestly but peremptorily and irrevocably denying'.

One may hope to hear a better account of the Provençal lyric poets shortly, when Mr. Alfred Jeanroy comes to London at the invitation of the University, and to find in them what Dante and Petrarch found—or even more than that, for it may prove that they are the original discoverers, followed by half of Christendom ever since in the art of lyric melody.

One is sometimes inclined to envy Warton and the other easy-going men of the older days when one looks at the systematic work of modern scholars—'now when all the claims have been pitched' as the old Greek poet said, thinking regretfully of the time when the ploughs had not been driven as yet through the fallow land. Chaucer's complaint with the same purport rises to mind:—

For wel I wot that folk han herbeforn
Of making ropen and lad away the corn,
And I come after glening here and there,
And am ful glad if I may finde an ere
Of any goodly word that they han laft.

But those complaints are not as sad as they seem, and they may be a comfort to the historians of poetry. Chaucer was not really, as he pretended, the last English poet, and possibly for the historians now to complain about the little free ground left to them might be a good omen for rich discoveries in the future; while the generous testimony borne by the scholars of France, Germany, and America to the work of Furnivall proves that the organization of research owes much to the unchartered freedom of the explorer, and is quick to acknowledge its debt. The example, on both sides, is good for the inauguration of the Warton Lecture.