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Thomas Sackville

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PROLEGOMENA

The student of literature who sets out to record the results of his enquiries, especially when they move in the field of sixteenth-century literature, finds himself confronted with a situation that may not be confined to his subject alone, but is nevertheless unsatisfactory. His science, if so it may be called, has grown out of a mass of older material with little more attempt at a system than that implied by the effort of a multitude of scholars to master it and set it forth in a more or less comprehensible form. Our efficient age, though rich in attempts at systematic presentation of the masses of material accumulated in the course of centuries, has left him as yet without a guide to the methods to be applied, or the results to be expected from them.

One main distinction has been developed, although here again there has been no attempt at a systematic application. It is the distinction between literary criticism and history of literature, so ably set forth, among others, by professor Greenlaw. It is a distinction of the greatest significance, the consequences of which for the writing of literary history and criticism should be more generally accepted than is as yet done in practice.

Literary criticism interprets the works of the past to the modern reader, in the light of the eternal values that belong to the human race. The history of literature, on the other hand, treats all the documents that concern its subject with equal consideration, making, in principle, no distinction of values at all, except in so far as they bear on matters of fact. The one is in search of beauty, or tries to interpret mankind to itself; the other is in search of truth with respect to its subject, and tries to represent, rather than interpret, the past. In a province so predominantly occupied with valued expressions of the human mind, a complete break between these two attitudes is difficult to make. Yet the absence of a clear conception of the function of either is dangerous, for the following reasons.

Criticism in its search for values is essentially an art. It may be applied in the investigation of the principles which govern the

human reaction to works of art as beautiful. In that case it is used scientifically, and operates in the wider field of aesthetics. It may even, though that is not now the fashion, concern itself with moral values, and approach ethics. But when it does neither, it is itself an art, and as such may, rightly, point out relations and perceptions, which are in no way justified, or called for, by historical facts.

Literary history cannot be allowed this freedom. It must keep to the facts, and try to present a picture of situations and developments in the past agreeing as closely as possible with the actual events as they took place.

There is, then, the possibility of a clash between the two, and confusion occurs more often than is generally suspected. No one will deny that an author in a study of literary history will make some sort of a creative contribution to the facts. If this creative attempt serves only to call to our minds the idea of what actually took place, it is still literary history. If it contains elements based on an appreciation of literary work, it is on the way to becoming something else, and in so far it no longer answers its purpose. The danger to a literary historian of being carried away by his subject, of embellishing history, and of losing the sense of proportion required in a truthful account, is extremely great.

Both the critical and the historical approach to literature are necessary. If we can be made aware of our great heritage of values by interpretative discussions on great works of art, it can only be a gain. By the side of this, however, there should also be a study of literature that intends to give a truthful account of its development and in which the human values never interfere with the truth. In some respects such a study may be judged less interesting, and even less valuable than criticism, but the literary historian will retort that truth is as great an ideal as beauty.

The present treatise is an attempt to make a brief contribution to literary history. It is concerned with the work of a single author, Thomas Sackville, whose works, a poem and a play, were published early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The subject at once shows that our methodical difficulties are not over. The two works are considered of unequal value, the poem being accepted as a good piece of literature, while the play has "only" historical interest. That difficulty can be overcome by a historical approach. But of

all the methods used in literary history which are we to apply here? Fortunately, the question more or less solves itself, as the materials available impose a certain order and manner of treatment. The usual method applied in a study of this kind, which we may call the biographical method, is of no use. Sackville wrote his two works when he was young, and afterwards became a statesman. A biographical treatment can hardly be useful when it reveals little or nothing as to the origin or sequence of the works. The habit of writing biographies, however, is not due only to a desire to establish dates. A reasonably good biography will reveal data about a personality and its development which are necessary preliminaries even in a historical account. As this investigation has yielded no results that bear directly upon Sackville's poetry, the biography is hereafter given separately, prefixed to the other investigations, as a necessary first step. The date of origin and the sequence of Sackville's publications are, however, also points of importance, certainly historically. Such evidence as can be found on this subject has, therefore, been assembled in a separate chapter, following the biography. These main points having been established, there remains the more literary part of the investigation. We want to know any particulars that can be found about the genesis of these works, about the technique applied, and about their relation to other works of literature both earlier and later. These issues are bound up with the history of sixteenth-century literature generally. However, the principle to be observed in discussing the works of one author is to confine oneself as much as possible to these works, and not to write a literary history of the period with a disproportionate amount of space devoted to the author in question. To effect this one must of necessity take the works of the author as a starting-point and insert so much of the general literary history of the period as is found necessary. It was possible to do just that in the discussion of the origins and sources of the poem and the play. The two works are, therefore, discussed separately from this point of view, while at the same time the handling of the sources provides scope for the introduction of the background material necessary for an understanding of Sackville's conception of the subject-matter as revealed in his work. With respect to the literary technique of the period, however, much has lately become known that seemed to apply to Sackville, while it was impossible to justify

from the poetry itself the way in which the investigation was conducted. A separate chapter is, therefore, inserted which discusses our suppositions with respect to the sixteenth-century technique of writing and our grounds for these suppositions, as well as the methods by which these can be substantiated in Sackville's case. The next chapter then provides a discussion of Sackville's technique in the light of these suppositions. The linguistic material in this chapter might seem, to some readers, to call for an exact quantitative investigation. This has not been given. Although in the case of Sackville the necessary material was collected, it is not possible on this basis alone to institute quantitative research of an essentially comparative nature. It is doubtful whether even a dictionary of current sixteenth-century English would provide the necessary basis for a comparison. In the circumstances it seemed preferable not to give all the data assembled for Sackville's poetry, since they would create an impression of exactness that is wholly unjustified by the facts.

These chapters together present materials for an understanding and a historical appreciation of Sackville's work in the light of the present state of sixteenth-century research. It would, however, be unfair to withhold from the reader the conclusions to which the investigation has led the present writer. Some of these conclusions with their bearing on the literary history of the period are, therefore, given in a final chapter. Besides being restricted to Sackville, however, they are offered only as one interpretation of material that may have more sides to it. Were these conclusions all that remained to be said, a very much briefer treatise would have sufficed. As it is, this study as a whole will enable the reader to arrive at conclusions of his own. In the hope that the present essay may contribute to literary history also in this sense, it is hereby offered for the reader's inspection.