

---

# A General Approach to Literature.

A. Elzinga

“Language is but a poor bull’s eye lantern wherewith to show off the vast cathedral of the world; and yet a particular thing once said in words is so definite and memorable, that it makes us forget the absence of the many which remain unexpressed” .....  
..... Stevenson.

## A. Introduction.

Nothing can be more important for a student than to learn to ask instantly of any work of art ..... a picture, a statue, a building as well as a novel or a play; (1) What was the artist’s design? What did the author attempt? (2) How near did he come to realize it? How well did he accomplish it? (3) What is the value of his work for his age and for ours?

To answer adequately; How well did the author accomplish it?, calls for more learning than most of us possess. This involves fair interpretation, impartial judgement and personal appreciation. The first is a matter of *study*, the second of *taste* and the third of *sympathy*.

By *study* we find out what situations confronted the author. By *taste* which is an *educated judgement* based upon *permanent standards*, we rank his work in relation to that of his contemporaries and of other ages ..... a most difficult task, from which it is hard to separate personal prejudices. By *sympathy*, a feeling quite as much as an idea, we voice the desire to see a good thing more widely known.

To interpret a book, this must be done in the light of the age in

---

which the story was written; in the light of the author's life; in the light of literary tendencies and in the light of the author's aim.

1. *Interpretation in the light of the age.* What kind of age did the author live in? What were the dominant interests in politics, industry, morals, manners, religion, or other human concerns? For example, Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress* is to be interpreted in the light of the seventeenth century nonconformist religion. Shakespeare demands a thoroughly knowledge of the Royal House and the rivalry in English sophisticated high class during the Shakesperean period. And Bret Harte's stories require knowledge of old days in California.

2. *Interpretation in the light of the author's life.* What is there in the author's life that throws light on the subject of the book? Illustrations; *David Copperfield* is full of autobiography. Bacon's *Essays* are a strange commentary on his career. The *Book of Psalms* demands for its understanding a knowledge of the Hebrew people and of the main writer; *King David*.

3. *Interpretation in the light of literary tendencies.* What literary tendencies were dominant when the book or play was written, to which it owes its origin, or against which it was a protest? For instance, many historical romances of the present time belong to the romantic revival represented by Stevenson.

4. *Interpretation in the light of the author's aim.* If the book is but slightly affected by contemporary problems, the author's life, or prevalent literary fashions, what is the task the author seems to have set before himself? George Eliot's, *Adam Bede*, may be interpreted as an attempt to show the far-reaching and irrevocable consequences of a moral choice by a moral being; Hardy's novels (almost all of them) as an attempt to show far-reaching consequences of moral accidents in a world of perverse destiny. We come across romances which reflect by means of a love story the conditions of a past age or a remote and picturesque region of

the country.

We come now to the second main question; How well has the author accomplished the task which he attempted? And, is the book well written? Let us consider the following inquiries;

1. Does the book stick to the point? Is the evident purpose of it obscured by a lack of unity? At the end of the book does the reader have a distinct impression of the dominant idea or mood for which it stands?

2. Has the book good proportion? Is there any considerable part of it which occupies too much space for the accomplishment of the purpose, and the maintenance of interest?

3. In the case of narrative, are the descriptions vivid, the conversations natural, and the characters life-like?

Language has this great advantage over ordinary pictures, that it can directly represent motion, by using nouns, adjectives, and verbs that represent motion. For instance, in a landscape there are *drifting* clouds, trees *swaying* in the wind, birds *fluttering low* or *soaring high*, water *flowing*; perhaps a train *thundering* by, or *trailing a thin wreath of white smoke* along a *dark* slope far away. Using nouns, adjectives and verbs representing motion is always a great help to *vividness*. A skillful writer will often choose to describe any scene, if possible, at a moment when there is the maximum of motion. A fire he will draw just as the walls totter and fall. Armies on the march, birds on the wing, the blacksmith at his anvil, the painter at his easel, the farmer at the plow ..... Motion produces vividness and tells us many things, and verbs of motion save many words of other sorts.

4. So far as we are able to compare the book with others by the same author, or with books by his contemporaries, or with similar works of other periods, how does it rank in comparison?

These are questions to which every intelligent reader can, upon reflection, make some kind of answer. They do not go completely

---

towards fixing an author's real rank, but they help to decide in our own minds why we think a book is worth-while.

Literary works based upon political or social conditions of the time, sometimes interwoven in a romance, or layed bare without any subtleties, have at times achieved a high degree of success in changing the life and thought of the author's time. Think for instance, of Uncle Tom's Cabin, a great idea crudely executed, had, because of the circumstances of the age, a tremendous effect upon public sentiment. Perhaps not a great literary success, but certainly the author achieved a degree of success in changing the thought on slavery. And Byron's English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, or Poe's The Murders in the Rue Morgue and The Gold Bug, all have great historical significance in excess of their absolute values. The question is, did the book stop an old abuse, or begin a new type? Did it mark the beginning or the end of any significant stage in human progress?

The final question is a question of personal appeal. What value has the book for us? This is the forming of a deliberate estimate, the voicing of thoughtful praise, the appeal of an *intelligent* sympathy. Does the book make goodness more compelling, and weakness more base? Does it radiate cheer, or teem with fascinating mystery? Do we learn in its pages how to read characters, how to penetrate the dullness of the good, and the false brilliancy of evil? Or is it just a good book to transport one out of every day into a world where weariness and anxiety is unknown, and the zest of youth is inexhaustible?

B. *Literature based upon the Aesthetic and the Imagery.*

"True criticism is an attempt to help people to understand why a thing is good,  
and to profit by its goodness; or to show them why it

is bad, and to guard them against its badness.”

John Rothwell Slater.

Questions stimulate thought and probe the mind. That was the purpose in the Introduction. When questions are given, answers are expected. And the answers are usually based upon standards, principles and disciplines set by the individual, by society or by religious convictions. Is the book worth-while reading? Is it a good book? The answer depends upon the standards or definitions or principles which have been adopted to measure “worthwhile-ness” or “goodness.”

Literature is a heritage of priceless value. English Literature is the priceless possession of every member of the English speaking peoples, and the sharing in this common heritage helps greatly in promoting mutual understanding and accord between English speaking peoples and nations, but also beyond the borders of those nations.

However, when we speak about Literature, it is well to know what we are really talking about. What is literature? What makes literature live? Why do some literary works stay alive and others fade away?

The confusion about what *is* and what *is not* literature is fundamentally a confusion about what literature is supposed to do, or what literature is supposed to be.

The ancient Roman poet, Horace, asserted that;” Literature is that work of art which is to please and to instruct.” ..... *To please*; even on the most elementary level a story or a poem can please us. We enjoy the suspense of a novel, or the way the writer describes characters, or how he creates through startling juxtaposition of words a kind of beauty which is pleasing. To step into the garden of literary art and to discover the intricacies of how a plant produces a beautiful flower is indeed pleasing.

The second principle in Horaces’ definition, “*to instruct*”, is not

---

so simple. Just what is literature suppose to instruct? What is literature suppose to teach us? Some scholars assume that literature should hammer home some sort of instruction with the intend of persuading the reader to this or that point of view. This was, ofcourse, the purpose of all literature as the medieval Roman Catholic hierarchy saw it. We find the same insistence on ideological purity in literature of the communist world for the past few decades or so.

Others may judge literature by the standard of significance of *what the work says*. Again, in a milder form, emphasis on instruction. On the surface this sounds fairly reasonable. But it is well possible that, because of one's religious bias or ideological thought, he may one day decide that a Papal Encyclical is better literature than, let us say, the poetry of Shakespeare. In the same way, those who come from the Puritan tradition may, (using the same standard of measure) choose Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress over the, let us say, more satisfying work of John Milton or T. S. Eliot. The very fact that certain literary works are banned from the libraries of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and from the communist world, supports my criticism.

The pure enjoyment (pleasure) can well be focussed on the *beauty* of literature. An authentic appreciation of beauty, that is, an aesthetic experience has certain characteristics. The list of these characteristics includes, contemplativeness, attentiveness and the awakening of the feelings. Moreover, to have an aesthetic experience, we must be in contact with an aesthetic object. This aesthetic object must possess the following qualities; *grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy and sensuousness*. Some scholars also add *disinterestedness*.

In first Corinthians 13, Paul cited *disinterestedness* as a characteristic of love; love "seeketh not her own." *To receive the full impact of an aesthetic object, we must be disinterested*, directing our attention to the object rather than to ourself; thus aesthetic experience will nourish our

capacity to rise above self-interest and to become absorbed in that which is not "me", or "I", but the other.

Nowhere is the disinterested reaction more fully evoked than in response to the aesthetic objects of God; mountains, sunsets, waterfalls, forests filled with snow, or a rippling stream in the valley. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Disinterestedness seems to be a necessary component of every aesthetic experience.

*Aesthetic experience is contemplativeness.* We recognize this as the quality that raises man above animality and that therefor must be developed in healthful balance with active living. There is an overt blending of aesthetics with morality in the terminology of a leading New Testament passage on contemplation; "Finally, Brethren, whatsoever things are *true*, whatsoever things are *honest*, whatsoever things are *just* whatsoever things are *pure*, whatsoever things are *lovely*, whatsoever things are of *good report*, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." (Philippians 4; 8).

*Aesthetic experience is attentiveness.* We can also say; "a heedful observation through the selective narrowing or focusing of consciousness and receptivity." To really experience true literary art, we must *discipline the mind* and *focus our consciousness*. Let us remember that everything worthwhile requires discipline.

*Aesthetic experience is the awakening of the feelings.* "The heart is the center of vital functions, the seat of affections, desires, thoughts" (Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology). Therefore statements such as, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4; 23) constitute a recognition of the importance of affections and desires as well as of reason.

According to Paul, the marks of the Holy Spirit in a man's life are these; "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Galations 5; 22, 23) ..... in short, the kind of

---

*orderliness* and *beauty* that we may expect in the form of a good work of art. However tempestuous or ugly the *content* of an art work may be, as the Book of Esther, the form brings the content under ordered control and thus into meaningful beauty through the fusing power of the imagination.

Truly good literature encourages an aesthetic experience as a response. Just what happens in this response, and how, is not easy to explain; and this short paper is not the place to attempt an analysis of the complex psychology of the aesthetic experiences.

About literary art, Coleridge (1772—1834) says; “We should ask ourselves when we have read a passage that perplexes us in a work of authority; What does the writer mean? What does he intend by all this?” In other words, Coleridge says, we must search for the mind and the intend of the writer. Coleridge puts emphasis on *discovery*.

Walt Whitman says; “True literary art is a means whereby men may be revealed to each other as brothers”. It seems to me that we try to remember that the medium through which writers speak to us is that of an art which uses the elements of words not for the conveying of information, or expounding ideas, but as a means for producing a response by which the reader sees with the author’s eyes, shares in his emotions, thinks his thoughts, and as nearly as possible lives the author’s experiences in his own imagination. This demands the discipline of the mind and of the feelings.

To be familiar with the *mere content* of any work of literature is in no sense to understand it. For it is *never the subject matter* which confers distinction and power upon a work of art, but rather, *the manner in which matter is presented*. This manner includes not only the choice of words itself but style and tone, form and pattern, various and distinctive literary devices and even an intrinsic and often intangible spiritual quality,



which Marcel Proust calls; " a quality of vision, a revelation of a private universe".

Literature, poetry or prose, leans heavy upon the emotions and the imagery. It embraces in its design and nature all kinds of feeling, Literature addresses the imagination, which is the faculty in us that enables us to organize the random tumble of experience into some sort of form and hence to manage it and savor it. Imagination is the image-making capacity in us, so that we speak of feeling like a wrung-out dishrag, or of a man's brow as looking like a thundercloud. Imagination is what makes art possible, because art is the transfiguration of the abstracts of experience (perception, emotion, ideas, and so on) into special forms, the idea being, not only that it is legitimate to handle human experience in this way, but, that in this way something emerges about human experience that is hidden from all the discursive analysis in the world.

There is a sense in which the imagination works in an opposite direction from the analytic faculty in us: it tends always toward concretion (the image) while analysis tends toward abstraction (the dismantling of the thing in question ..... blood, granite, soil, water and so on). In any case, literature addresses this imagination in us. It hails us with vivid cases in point of otherwise blurred and cluttered experience. Homer's heroic handling of jealousy, rage, bravery cynicism, love and endurance in the figures of Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector, Ulysses; Shakespeare's probing of overweening pride in Macbeth, or of jealousy in Othello; Milton's shaping of the human experience of evil and loss into the Paradise Lost. These are familiar to us. We read them in school. And perhaps we remember a stirring in us, or a brief glimpse of something that arrested us, or even a tidal wave of new awareness of what was at stake in human existence.

The world is full of such works of the imagination, all of them trying to see and utter and shape the human experience. The sixteenth

---

century produced in the English language some of the greatest drama (Shakespeare and his contemporaries), as well as unsurpassed lyric beauty in the work of Spenser, Sidney, and again Shakespeare.

For the English speaking people another source of great and glorious literature came into being through the King James Bible, (1611). For the student of English literature, no education will be complete in which classical and Biblical literature do not stand side by side.

So far we have emphasized the aesthetic and imagery. Literature embraces in its design and nature not only the imagery, but deep emotions, feelings. It may be joyous or desponding, fear or hope, triumphant or defeated, love or hate. These feelings are, however, *based upon real experiences in life. Great literature imitates life.* That does not mean that it is life, but it does imply that the best literature takes general human experiences and distills and compresses them in an orderly fashion in the twenty or so lines of a poem, or, the thirty odd chapters of a novel so as to part and lift the veil of the meaning of human experience in some way. Time to human beings is measured not by passing of hours, but *by the crowding of experiences.* In our every day living we meet the challenge of today in the light of *experience* gained yesterday and the day before. Through the centuries human nature has not changed much in its fundamental impulses and desires. There have always been problems to solve, individual and social, conflicts to adjust. Indeed many of the conflicts that disturb us today are rooted in the conflicts of past centuries. What solutions, wise and foolish, were proposed and tried through the sharing of experiences using the medium of literary art ! If we are able to discover the answers, we may gain a better grasp of what is going on within us and around us. We may gain a sounder judgement in dealing first of all with ourselves, and also with each other, and the world.

C. *Literature rooted in experiences.*

They are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time.

Shakespeare

All really great literature is basically a sharing of experience. Professor Oscar Campwell, professor of English Literature at the University of Michigan from 1921 to 1935, said in an address given at Columbia University on October 31, 1935; "An artist writes about the *life he knows* as nature dictates, in an idiom which his audiences will learn to understand. These are the first principles, not of defeat for a writer, but of the author's success. All literary achievement must be *rooted* in the author's experience".

To substantiate this, allow me to turn your attention to Biblical Poetry. In his book, *poetry in Worship*, professor John Mc Naugher says; "When Horace and Ovid are forgotten, and the dramas of Shakespeare have worn out, the lyrics of the poetry of the Bible will still command the admiration of true poets and essayists and be hymned and harped for the aesthetic, imagery and vigorous expressions of experiences". (John Mc Naugher, *Professor of Bible Literature*, 1907, page 369)

The Bible, in the form in which most of us wisely read it, the King James Version, has been called by John Livingstone Lowes; "the noblest monument of English prose". It is as well the richest monument, for within its covers are to be found all types of literature, both in prose and in poetry. Here are ancient songs, written by unknown hands before the year 1000 B. C., still well preserved, read and loved. The finest and most elaborate of these early songs is a war song, Deborah's famous ode which celebrates Israel's victory over Sisera (Judges 5). This war song was composed by the great prophetess herself or by some contemporary. It is remarkable for its literary quality and poetic power. It begins with an imposing description of Yahweh's march from Sinai to

---

battle for His people, and a sketch of the conditions of the time. The enthusiastic rally of the tribes who lived in or near the great plain of Esdraelon is then contrasted with the attitude of the more distant ones who kept aloof. A vivid picture of the mighty battle follows, with the flight of Sisera and the inglorious death at the hand of Jael, while a masterly portrayal of the anxious mother of Sisera and her ladies-in-waiting who are anticipating their share in Siserra's spoil, which will never come, concludes the ode.

Because the leaders took the lead in Israel  
because the people freely volunteered  
bless ye Yahweh!

Hear, O ye kings; ye princes give ear!  
I will sing to Yahweh,  
I will sing praise to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Yahweh, when Thou wentest forth from Seir,  
When Thou marchedst from Edom's field  
The earth trembled, the heavens also swayed,  
yea, the clouds poured water,  
the mountains quaked at the presence of Yahweh, God of  
Israel.

In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath  
caravans ceased  
and wayfaring men took roundabout ways.  
The rural population had ceased,  
Until thou didst arise, Deborah,  
didst arise a mother in Israel.

They chose new gods

then was war in the gates,  
A shield or spear was not seen  
among forty thousand in Israel,  
My heart belongs to the rulers of Israel  
to those that freely volunteered among the people!

Bless ye Yahweh,  
ye that ride on tawny asses  
Ye that sit on rich carpets  
and ye that walk by the way, sing!  
Hark the archers at the watering places!  
there they rehearse the victories of Yahweh,  
The victories of his country folk in Israel  
at the time the people of Yahweh went down to the  
gates.

Rouse thee, rouse thee, Deborah;  
rouse thee, rouse thee, utter a song;  
arise Barak, and lead forth thy captors,  
thou son of Abinoam.

Then marched down for him the nobles,  
and the people of Yahweh marched down for him as  
heroes.

From Ephraim they came down to the valleys,  
after them Benjamin with his hosts;  
From Machir came down commanders,  
and from Zebulun they that wield the marshal's staff.  
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah;  
as was Issachar, so was Barak,  
into the valley they rushed at his heels.

---

Among the tribal divisions of Reuben  
were great searchings of heart  
Why didst thou sit still among the sheepfolds,  
to hear the flute calls of the flocks?  
Gilead remained beyond the Jordan:  
and Dan sought the protection of ships!  
Asher sat still on the shore of the sea,  
and abode by his landings.  
Zebulun is a people that jeopardized their lives to the death,  
Naphtali also, upon the heights of the field.

The kings came and they fought;  
then fought the kings of Canaan,  
In Tannach by the waters of Megiddo:  
they took no gain of money.  
From heaven fought the stars,  
from their courses they fought against Sisera,  
The river Kishon swept them away,  
that onrushing river, the river Kishon.  
O my soul, march on with strength.  
Then were battered the hoofs of the horses  
by the furious galloping of their chargers.

Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of Yahweh,  
curse bitterly its inhabitants,  
Because they came not to the help of Yahweh,  
to Yahweh's help among the heroes.

Blessed above women be Jael,  
blessed above women in the tent.  
Water he asked, milk she gave;

she brought him curd in a lordly bowl.  
She put forth her hand to the tent pin,  
and her right hand to the workmans' hammer;  
And with the hammer she battered Sisera, she crushed his head;  
yea, she shattered and struck through his temple.  
At her feet he sank down, he fell, he lay still,  
where he sank down, there he lay slain.

Out of the window leaned Sisera's mother  
and looked through the lattice,  
"Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
why tarry the hoof-beats of his horses?"  
The wisest of princesses answered her,  
yea, t'is she that made reply to her,  
"Surely they are finding, dividing the spoil,  
a damsel or two for each man;  
Booty of dyed garments for Sisera,  
booty of dyed garments, embroidered,  
a dyed garment, two pieces of embroidered stuff  
for the neck of ....."

(from the Bible, Judges 5, translated from the  
original text by Julius A. Brewer, Professor  
in Union Theological Seminary.

The Literature of the Old Testament, page 7, 8.)

Professor Brewer writes; "This triumphal ode belongs in the judgment of critics to the finest ode in the literature of the world and is not excelled in poetic power by any of the later war poems of Israel." (The Literature of the Old Testament, page 8.)

But now notice how this ode is based upon experience. Deborah saw with her eyes (physical experience) the unbalanced power of the war.

---

Israel, completely unarmed, no spears, no shields, nothing in the way of armaments. On the other side she saw the war chariots of Sisera well equipped with armoury. Deborah saw with her eyes how the faithful of Isreal gathered together "upon the heights of the field," as a flock of helpless sheep. But Deborah also saw with her mind (intellectual experience). She saw the courage, the nobleness, the braveness of that small group upon the heights. And above all she saw with her heart, her spirit (emotional and spiritual experience). She saw Yahweh the invisible, visible in all His majesty, His glory and invincible power. Out of these experiences this gem of literary art was born.

From Deborah throughout the ages great literature has been rooted in experience. Authors of the 18th and 19th century ..... 1770 ..... 1909, from Wordsworth to Swinburne, were ready to tell us about themselves, their *inmost experience*. Self-revelation was one of the leading strains in the complex that we call, "romanticism".

Literature more than any other art, deals with people ..... with men, women and children. With their varied states of mind and feeling; loves, hates, dreams, aspirations, pity, fear, disappointments, hopefulness and dejection, breathless excitement and quiet wonder. Walt Whitman said upon the publication of his *Leaves of Grass*; "This book arose out of my life".

We have already discussed how important in work of literary art is its' imagery. *This imagery is based upon the experiences of men and women engaged* in various actions. Or at times we see this imagery responding to creation, the mountains, valleys, meadows, tumbling stream, quiet waters, singing birds, weeping willows, beasts and flowers, Indeed, imaginatively we can hear the sound of Shelley's "Wild West Wind," or the song of Keats's "Nightingale." Imagery is a kind of *inner experience*.



D. *The Final Definition.*

In our attempt to find an answer to the questions: What makes literature live? Why do some literary works stay alive and others fade away? we have talked about aesthetic experiences, beauty, imagery, and other experiences. Let us now formulate the final definition. What actually makes a work live as literature is; *an imagery and depth perception* in presenting *realistically the conflicts, dilemmas and experiences of life.*

At first glance this definition may seem contradictory. Can imagery be realistic? Let us turn to some of the Psalms. First Psalm 23. It is generally accepted that David is the author of this beautiful Psalm. The contents of this Psalm indeed corresponds with the facts of his early life. David was a shepherdboy watching over the sheep of his father. In this Psalm, (it is uncertain when it was composed) David talks about God as His Shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down

in green pastures:

He leadeth me beside still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness

for His name's sake

Yea, though I walk through the valley

of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil:

For thou art with me;

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me .....Psalm 23: 1-4

---

The imagery takes David to the green pastures and the still waters, following the Shepherd. The lying down in green pastures besides the still waters suggest that the needs are completely supplied. The flock is fully fed and is satisfied. This is very realistic to David. God is His Shepherd. He belongs to the flock. His needs will be satisfied, and have been satisfied. We may notice this satisfaction, from, *He leadeth me beside the still waters*. Not stormy, rolling, turbulent waves, but *still waters*. This denotes calmness, repose, peace flowing through the authors soul. Indeed, this Psalm with its exquisite beauty has great imagery, but at the same time, it is very realistic.

The author of Psalm 23, reviewing the past has complete confidence in the future. Taylor writing on this Psalm in the Gray and Adams Bible Commentary, says; "The shepherd carried with him two instruments, the staff, for his own support and to attack a beast or robber; and the rod, which is a hooked staff. By this rod the shepherd guided a sheep in a dangerous pass, placing the hook under the sheeps' neck, and holding him up to assist his steps. When a sheep was on his way to stray, the shepherd could hold him back with this hook. When the sheep had fallen into the power of a beast, the hook assisted in drawing him away. A good sheep loved the hook as much as the staff..... to be guided as well as defended. Both of the shepherds tools were a great comfort to the sheep while passing through a dangerous valley."

Beneath the burning skies, and the starry nights of Palestine, there grows up between the shepherd and his flock an union of attachment and tenderness. This had been the authors' experience in the past, reflecting upon this experience his imagery carries him into a hope of goodness and mercy through the guidance and care of His Shepherd.

Another example of imagery and reality we find in the "Nature Psalms," especially Psalms 8, 19 and 104.

O Lord, our Lord,

how excellent is thy name  
in all the earth.

Out of the mouth of babes and suckling  
hast thou ordained strength,  
that thou mightest still the enemy  
and the avenger.

When I consider thy heavens,  
the work of thy fingers;  
the moon and the stars,  
which thou hast ordained;

What is man, that thou art mindful of Him?  
and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him  
a little lower than the angels,  
And hast crowned him  
with glory and honour.

Thou madest him to have dominion  
over the works of thy hands;  
thou hast put all things under his feet:

All sheep and oxen,  
yea, and the beasts of the field;  
The fowl of the air;  
and the fish of the sea,  
and what soever passeth through the paths of the seas.

O Lord our Lord,  
How excellent is thy name

---

in all the earth!

Psalm 8.

In Barnes Notes on this Psalm we read on page 65 the following comment; "If we may judge from the psalm itself, it would seem probable that it was composed by night in the contemplation of the starry heavens... naturally suggesting in view of the vastness and beauty of the celestial luminaries, the littleness of man."

"That it was composed or suggested in the night seems probable from verse three, where the psalmist represents himself as surveying or 'considering' the 'heavens; the work of thy fingers,' and as making the 'moon and the stars' the subject of contemplation, but not mentioning the sun. In such contemplations, when looking on the vastness and grandeur, the beauty and order, of the heavenly hosts, it was not unnnatural for the writer to think of his own comparative littleness, and then the comparative littleness of man everywhere. No time is more favourable for suggesting such thoughts than the still night, when the stars are shining clearly in the heavens, and when the moon is moving on in the silent majesty of its course." Let us also listen to Psalm 19;

"The Heavens declare the glory of God  
and the firmament showeth his handywork

Day unto day uttereth speech,  
and night unto night showeth knowledge.

There is no speech nor language;  
their voice is not heard.

Their line is gone out through all the earth  
and their words to the end of the world.  
in them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun,

Which is as a bridegroom  
cometh out of his chamber,  
and rejoiceth as a strong man  
to run his course.

His going forth is from the end of the heavens  
and his circuit unto the ends of it;  
and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof .....

Psalm 19; 1-6.

About Psalm 19, Kant said : "The stary sky above me and the moral law in me, are two things which fill the soul with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence." The proclamation in this Psalm is continuous and unceasing. Each day, each night, hands on the message to its successor in an unbroken tradition. Day and night are mentioned separately, for each has a special message entrusted to it; the day tells of splendor, power, beneficence; the night tells of vastness, order, mystery, beauty, repose. They are like the two parts of a choir, chanting forth alternately the praise of God.

Pure nature poetry is rare, but the few we have are filled with depth perception, imagery and vividness. Perhaps the most beautiful of them all is Psalm 104.

Bless Jehovah, O my soul,  
O Jehovah my God, thou art very great;  
Thou art clothed with honor and majesty;  
  
Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment;  
Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain;  
  
Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters;  
Who maketh the clouds his chariot;  
Who walketh upon the wings of the wind;

---

history, the character and the temper of a race is reflected in the works of its' poets and novelists. Not so much in what is written about it, but in the works of the poets and novelists who are *in* and *of* the race itself, living in the usual houses, (sometimes unusual), laboring under many of the popular and unpopular delussions, setting down on paper what they see, observe and feel..... what they themselves are.

We have an interesting historical romance in the Book of Esther. The story is a historical novel but not strict history. The unknown author of Esther was a supreme architect in literature. The tale is told with great artistic skill and its plot is unfolded with remarkable literary ability. In strong contrast with the Book of Ruth, the characters in Esther are intolerant, filled with hate and ruthlessness. Nationalism plays an important part. From a strictly literary point of view it remains a jewel.

The Book of Jonah is of a different color. Long ago, in the time of Jeroboam II of Israel (784-744) Jonah lived and prophesied victory and national aggrandizement to that brilliant king. Jonah, which means 'dove, and was used as a symbolical name for Israel..... was most probably a thoroughly nationalistic prophet. The story of Jonah in the big fish seems to be so well known, it needs not repeated here. As literature Jonah does not have the appeal equal to the Books of Ruth and Esther. However, in spite of the simplicity of the author's narration, perhaps indeed because of it, Jonah emerges from the story as one of the most complex characterizations in the Old Testament, and deserves a separate study.

The charming little idyl which has always roused the admiration of literary men and women by its exquisite beauty and which Goethe declared to be "the loveliest little whole, that has been preserved to us among the epics and idyls" is; *The Book of Ruth*. We may justly call this short story, *A Literary Gem*.

The book of Ruth is one of the most graceful and charming of short

stories not only in ancient literature but of any time and in any language, and well deserves the high place accorded it by critics of various countries and ages.

The author is unknown, also the time of writing is unknown. Some scholars claim the story was written about the year 450 B.C, or some one hundred years after the Return to Jerusalem from Babylon. Its unknown author, however, sets it some seven hundred years earlier, for he begins it well and directly with the words: "Now in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land." There has always been a controversy among scholars and admirers of his story about the time and about the purpose of the author. Was he an ancient propagandist or merely an ancient artist? Artist he certainly was, too good a one to appeal a moral to his tale.

The Book of Ruth tells of the loyalty of Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, her dilligence and prudence and her great reward. After the death of her husband and her two sons in Moab, where the sons had married Moabite wives Orpah and Ruth, Naomi decided to go back to her native town of Bethlehem in Judah. Orpah returns to her home, but in spite of Naomi's urgent appeals Ruth insisted on going with her, declaring in those beautiful words that have since been repeated by thousands of women;

"Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; Yahweh do so to me, and more so, if aught but death part thee and me." (Ruth 1: 16-18)

They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest and Ruth, realizing that winter would soon be knocking at the door, went

---

into the fields to glean after the reapers. She happened on the field of Boaz, who saw her later and invited her to glean only in his field, and gave orders to treat her kindly. To her astonished question, why he should show such favor to a foreigner, he replied;

“It has fully been showed me, all that thou hast done to thy mother-in-law since the death of thy husband; and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and thy native land, and art come to a people that thou knewest not heretofore. Yahweh recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to take refuge.” (Ruth 2; 11, 12)

When Naomi learned of Ruth in whose field she had been gleaning she rejoiced, for Boaz was one of her near kinsmen, (relatives). And when the harvest came to an end, Naomi had her plan ready, and Ruth obediently carried it out, although it involved no ordinary task. But Naomi had estimated Boaz's character rightly. When he started up during that night from his sleep on the threshingfloor after the joyful harvest meal and discovered Ruth lying at his feet, he treated her with honor and promised to fulfil his kinsman's duties towards Naomi and also towards Ruth, if a still closer relative did not claim his duties. Richly laden with gifts Ruth returned home to Naomi and gave full account of what had taken place during the night.

On the morrow Boaz offered the kinsman's privilege of fulfilling the kinsman's duties according to the laws of the nation, to the other relative, but when the other relative refused after learning that he must also marry Ruth in addition, Boaz took all the responsibilities according to the laws and he took Ruth as his wife amidst the loud and hearty felicitations of all the people. In due course, Ruth gave birth to a son, and the happy Naomi became his nurse. And this son Obed became



later Jesse's father, and Jesse's son was none other than King David.

No lesson is appended, no moral is affixed. The author was far too great an artist for this. Was it not plain to everybody that God is no respecter of race and nationality, that He looks at the heart and rewards such goodness as Ruth's most richly? Even a hated Moabite whom the law would never allow to become a Jew (Deuteronomy 23:3; Nehemia 13;I-3) may be certain of His blessings, if he is only righteous in his life. And surely. God does not look with indiscriminate disfavor upon all mixed marriages, since He blessed Boaz's marriage with the lovely Moabitess Ruth in such signal fashion that they became the ancestors of Israel's greatest King! True righteousness alone counts with Him and that is a matter of the heart and life, not of race and nationality.

Within his own prescribed limits the author has beautifully done what he obviously set out to do. The picture of Ruth, the Moabitess, working with the reapers and receiving her portion of food at noon-day from the hands of the hospitable hands of Boaz, of her gleaning untill evening, has a pleasing, pastoral quality which reminds one of other ancient settings of Arcadian simplicity. This idyllic atmosphere extends also to the characters. The author has drawn them with no sense of uncertainties of human psychology such as the writer of the story of Jonah was to show a century or two later. Not one of the characters in the Book of Ruth is in the least complex; the natures of all are open and simple and honest. Naomi, it is true, may show some shrewdness in her foresight in planning for her daughter-in-law's future happiness at the hands of Boaz; nevertheless, her act is not so much designing on her part as it is in accordance with the Hebrew custom of reminding a Kinsman of his duty. Naomi is as thoughtful of her foreign daughter-in-law as though she were her own blood, not failing, for instance, at night, in a homely touch of the author, to save supper for her after her day's work in the field. Ruth herself, in the words of Boaz, is blessed by God in

---

spite of her Moabitish inheritance in that she has eyes for no young men "whether poor or rich." And even the neighbours are capable of honest rejoicing with Naomi when her grandson is born and of saying that this foreign daughter-in-law of hers proved better to her than seven sons.

A charming air of courtesy runs throughout this short story. The use of tradition and custom add their age and, therefore, their richness of atmosphere. Throughout the style and language of the author heighten the effect which he wishes to gain and hold. His simple and direct prose has from first to last an undertone of poetry. Truly, a literary gem.

Worthy literature, is not ornamental, not flowery, not the pumping up of unnatural language filled with obscure metaphores, is not beguiling and pleasure giving fancy, is not a lovely embroidered cover drawn over a dirty face, is not charm to make a mind forget;..... but it is revelation, it is discovery. Its essence is precision of the motion, vividness. Its quality is to illuminate from within, depth perception. Its language is the language of experience. Its beauty is simplicity, the ability to say the thing well, and seeing, feeling things that are worth saying.

.....

*Bibliography;*

The Bible and the Common Reader.

M.E. Chase, (1944)

The MacMillan Company, New York.

Freshman Rhetoric.

John Rothwell Slater, Ph.D. (1913)

Heath and Co.; Chicago.

The Literature of the Old Testament.

Julius A. Bewer. Litt. D. (1933)

Columbia University Press, New York.

Barnes Notes on the Old Testament, Psalms.

Albert Barnes, D.D. (1962)

Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Poetry of the Bible.

Sandford Calvin Yoder, S.T.D., D.D. (1952)

Herald Press, Pennsylvania.

Reflections on the Psalms.

C.S. Lewis Ph.D. (1958)

Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York.

The Oratory and Poetry of the Bible.

Ferdinand S. Schenck, D.D., L.L.D. (1915)

Doran Company, New York.

The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today.

Samuel Terrein, Ph.D. (1952)

The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., New York.

Life and Language of the Old Testament

M.E. Chase. Litt. D.

W.W. Norton and Company., Inc. New York.

An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament.

S.R. Driver Ph.D., (1957)

Meridian Books Press, New York.

The Bible.

King James Version, 1611

American Standard Version, 1901.

---

The Bible as Literature

Richard G. Moulton, Ph.D. (1896)

University Press, Cambridge. U.S.A.

.....

A. Elzinga.