

The Theory of Poetry in England by R. P. Cowl

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REVIEWS.

The Theory of Poetry in England. By R. P. COWL. London : Macmillan. 1914. 8vo. xiv + 320 pp.

Mr Cowl has attempted in this compact volume three things: 'to exhibit in selected documents the historical development of the general theory of poetry from the middle of the sixteenth century to the close of the nineteenth century'; 'to determine from authoritative sources the theoretical principles of the several schools of poetry and criticism'; and 'to present the arguments that have been advanced for or against controverted principles or doctrines.' The collection has been made with industry and learning, and we have no doubt of its utility. But it must be pointed out that the rather ambitious programme above laid down cannot be adequately carried out in a book confined to the opinions of English critics. 'The historical development of the theory of poetry' cannot be 'exhibited' in English documents for the reason that important steps in it were taken on the continent, and owed their character to intellectual conditions there alone prevailing. Thus French classicism from the Pléiade to Boileau may be called a development without grave qualification, if we will; but English classicism from Sidney to Pope is rather a succession of detached or slightly connected tidal waves. Original criticism there has been in England in abundance; but in 'school' criticism, that which sets forth 'the theoretical principles' of this or the other branch of criticism, we have never been so rich as in those heretical adaptations of traditional theory to individual bent, which please our insular genius. Mr Cowl's collection is mainly occupied with the conflict between the Neo-Classical and Romantic theories of poetry, which in a variety of phases and modifications runs through his three centuries. The extracts illustrating the beginning of the 'Romantic Revolt'—especially those from the still not very accessible writings of Hurd, Warton and Young, will no doubt be serviceable. The entire omission, on the other hand, of Shaftesbury and his individual and engaging presentation of the 'classicist' point of view is a serious lacuna. Shaftesbury is probably, when all is said, our most original thinker upon aesthetics before the nineteenth century, and he is still far from having received his due in England. In this and other points Mr Cowl's book would have benefited from recent German studies in eighteenth-century aesthetics. And an older book, H. von

Stein's *Die Entstehung der neueren Ästhetik* (1886), is still, to our thinking, in spite of more elaborate and diffuse successors, the ablest handling of its subject. Not to end on a note of disapproval, we observe the agreeable admission, here and there, among the more solemn debates and arguments, of a pointed *obiter dictum* from the essayists or novelists, such as Sterne's playful diatribe on 'the rules.' 'Great Apollo! if thou art in a giving humour,—give me—I ask no more, but one stroke of native humour, with a single stroke of thy own fire along with it—and send Mercury, with the *rules and compasses*, if he can be spared, with my compliments, to—no matter.'

C. H. HERFORD.

MANCHESTER.

The Evolution of Technic in Elizabethan Tragedy. By HARRIOTT ELY FANSLER. Chicago and New York: Roe, Peterson and Co. 1914. 8vo.

The book would perhaps be more suitably named 'The Evolution of Shakespeare's Technic in Tragedy,' for it is chiefly occupied with that subject; and although its announced aim is to present the phenomena from which Elizabethan tragedy developed its technique and to illustrate this development by Shakespeare, it cannot be justly claimed that the finer subtleties which made his art in tragedy what it was ever became the common fashion of Elizabethan playwrights. By way of showing the technical inheritance passed on to Shakespeare for tragedy, the author analyses carefully the potentialities of the earlier religious plays as regards tragedy figures and motives, notes the influence of *The Spanish Tragedy* in teaching how to centre strongly on Senecan revenge, and in using a Senecan ghost to guide the revenge, and reminds us that Marlowe's contribution to the developing technique was the creation of a powerful protagonist who absorbed in himself all the interest of the play. At the beginning of his career Shakespeare was content with adding as his important contribution a strongly emphasized antagonist who should divide the interest with the chief struggler, and in the end subdue him. As he worked forward, however, in technique and especially in philosophy of life, he believed more and more in placing the struggle and cause for downfall in the protagonist's own nature, and in making the external enemy, or enemies, the inevitable result of conditions there.

Within certain limits of emphasis, few would be inclined to dispute this general theory, and in general it may be said that the book has neither disturbed accepted ideas in any significant way, nor greatly enlarged them. The author's comments upon Shakespeare's gradual mastery of the tragic art are frequently acute and usefully analytic, but it is impossible for many of us to believe that Shakespeare worked with so conscious a method as all the heavy nomenclature used by Professor