

CHAPTER I

FORMGESCHICHTE, OR THE CRITICISM OF LITERARY FORM

There is a theory that the history of literature is the history of its various forms. This may be true of literature properly so-called, but it cannot be applied indiscriminately to every kind of writing. It has, however, special significance when applied to materials where the author's personality is of little importance. Many anonymous persons take part in handing down popular tradition. They act, however, not merely as vehicles, but also as creative forces by introducing changes or additions without any single person having a "literary" intent. In such cases the personal peculiarities of the composer or narrator have little significance; much greater importance attaches to the form in which the tradition is cast by practical necessities, by usage, or by origin. The development goes on steadily and independently, subject all the time to certain definite rules, for no creative mind has worked upon the material and impressed it with his own personality.

What we have said is true also in marked degree of the humbler forms of literature. By this phraseology I mean that lower stratum which accords no place to the artistic devices and tendencies of literary and polished writing. Unpretentious literary products find their readers in circles not touched by literature proper. Yet the former like the latter are meant for a definite publicity and are not written merely for the circle of the author's acquaintance. Here we have a difference between even unpretentious literature and writings which are entirely private. To-day this difference is easily grasped, for the

fact of publication through press and trade distinguishes petty tracts, popular calendars, and brochures issued by societies, from mere personal notes on the one hand, and from writings manifolded by the printing press or printed as "manuscript" on the other. But in the case of ancient writings this criterion cannot be applied, for we have no certainty as to the method of their publication. In regard to Paul's letters, which were copied and recopied many times for use by the restricted public of the Christian Church, we may raise the question as to the moment when they ceased to be private writings and became a lowly form of literature. Again, in the case of many writings of the New Testament, we cannot say to what extent they were originally intended for publication, a term which, in this connexion would mean general use in the restricted circle mentioned above. If we knew in what way the so-called Epistle to the Ephesians was first made public, we should soon reach agreement as to its character. Primitive Christian literature passed through all the stages between private notes and the borders of literature proper. Only two or three of its documents approximate to the literary standards of Philo and Josephus. All the rest is either quite non-literary or of minor literary significance. The evolution took place without direct influence from literature proper. We may therefore speak in a special sense of a "primitive Christian literature", whereas the "early Christian writings" of a later date can be classified—at least as regards their form—amongst Hellenistic literature.

In prosecuting a research in the history of the Form of the Gospels, we must concern ourselves first of all and most of all with only one section of primitive Christian literature, namely the synoptic Gospels. Without a doubt these are unliterary writings. They should not and cannot be compared with "literary" works. Nevertheless they are certainly not private notes but are designed for a definite publicity even if it be only humble. But the literary character of these books shows certain marks which differentiate them from

other primitive Christian writings. The literary understanding of the synoptics begins with the recognition that they are collections of material. The composers are only to the smallest extent authors. They are principally collectors, vehicles of tradition, editors. Before all else their labour consists in handing down, grouping, and working over the material which has come to them. Therein also their religious presentation of the material comes to essential expression. Thus they make their influence felt with much less independence than, say, the composer of the Fourth Gospel and much less also than the author of the Book of Acts. The latter is indeed himself an evangelist, but he is much more bound by his material in the Gospel of St. Luke than in the Acts of the Apostles. Here he acts as an author, but in the Gospel rather as a collector and editor. For this reason St. Luke more than the other synoptics shows the strongest literary character. Thereby it can be estimated in how lowly a degree after all St. Mark and St. Matthew may pass as authors. These matters are no longer in doubt and thus we may draw the following conclusions, although these are by no means generally recognized.

The position taken by the evangelists in forming the literary character of synoptic tradition is limited. It is concerned with the choice, the limitation, and the final shaping of material, but not with the original moulding. The form in which we hear of the words and deeds of Jesus is due only in a certain degree to the personal work of the evangelist. Owing to a philological and theological tradition we ourselves have become accustomed to ascribe to the authors and their prejudices a large responsibility for the tradition as a whole, just as if we were dealing with Belles Lettres. This error is ancient. Even Papias in the second century is entirely of the view that the evangelists were authors who shaped their narrative with literary freedom according to their knowledge of the events. In reality the personal factors had but little significance in shaping the

tradition, at any rate as far as the Gospels of Mark and Matthew are concerned, and it is very doubtful whether much depended upon the personal factor in the earlier history of the tradition. Here we touch upon a further question with which our present enquiry will deal at much greater length. It is that a critical reading of the Gospels shows that the evangelists took over material which already possessed a form of its own. They joined some paragraphs together which beforehand had possessed a certain independent completeness.

The criticism of the Form of the Gospel, i.e. of this material, does not begin, therefore, with the work of the evangelists, for it has rather already reached a certain *completion of development* by the time we have reached the form of the evangelical books. What now takes place is the further development of this category of writing up to the collecting of a tradition that had grown "wild" and that had been consciously corrected. The apocryphal Gospels have apparently preserved such collections. What took place previously was the formation and the growth of small separate pieces out of which the Gospels were put together. Even these little pieces obey the laws of Form-construction. They do it all the more as in the development of *their* form the individuality of an original writer played no real part. To trace out those laws, to make comprehensible the rise of these little categories, is to write the history of the Form of the Gospel.

The first edition of this book in 1919 was intended as a working basis for reading the Gospels from the point of view of the development of their form. A few years earlier the title of the work had been used in a significant manner when Eduard Norden in 1913 gave to his book "Agnostos Theos" the subsidiary title "Researches in the Formen-geschichte of Religious Language". This book was intended to deal with a type of speech of a soteriological character. Hence his researches were to a large extent on that level of literature where the individual taste of the author determined the final form of the material which had been handed down.

Research into popular non-literary writing with which the *Formgeschichte* of the Gospel deals had, in many regions, already gathered experience and developed methods. Johann Gottfried Herder was the pioneer of such movements in the sphere of biblical literature. As an interpreter of biblical writings he intuitively put forward many axioms which only at a later date were to reach significance for criticism. His understanding of the popular mind revealed to him the special character of religious popular literature, and his understanding of human nature showed him what was the typical character of such writing. His understanding of folk poetry enabled him to recognize the naïve and creative element in the biblical writings. Of course, he was not able always to distinguish between æsthetic appreciation and literary evaluation, hence the researches of the nineteenth century into the sources of the Gospels were not able to carry his work further, because they were immediately concerned with historical results. But ever and again in the middle of this period of historical work, the consciousness came forward that in the case of some of the biblical writings, and especially in those of the first century of our era, the subject was not literature created by the mind of the author, but formulations which necessarily come from the presence and activity of a circle strange to literature. In this sense Franz Overbeck differentiated primitive Christian literature from patristic literature. In the same way Georg Heinrici defined the contents of the synoptic Gospels as collected material, and he differentiated them, and the other New Testament writings, from literature proper. They were to him the sources and the witnesses of a missionary activity. The possibility of analysing this collected material was first systematically proved in the sphere of the Old Testament where it was traced back to the minutest perceptible forms of tradition. By their researches Herrmann Gunkel and his school made the analysis of the "smallest details" an axiom of research.

A method of handling popular categories in accordance

with the history of their form (in the proper sense of the term), i.e. in accordance with the way in which these categories could be distinguished in the writings of the Old Testament, was only reached when, from the form in which the detail was cast, a conclusion could be drawn as to the original purpose and the practical application of the detail, in a word, as to its "Sitz im Leben", or place in the stream of life. Adolf Deissmann had already effected something decisive for putting the oldest passages of Christian tradition and of the Gospels themselves into their proper place in a development which was progressing from unliterary writing to popular literature, but which did not reach the level of *Belles Lettres*. By comparing primitive Christian documents with the unliterary texts of the Papyri he obtained a new understanding which was of immediate importance for interpreting the Pauline letters. The insight into the differences between unliterary writing and popular literature, which he had thereby gained, resulted in new criteria of value for measuring the significance of the Gospel tradition. By putting on one side all evaluations derived from literature proper, and certainly everything from the classics, the way was open for appreciating the language and the style of primitive Christian writing according to its own laws.

The right to read the Gospels from the standpoint of the development of their form is the objective of the present volume. This right is supported in no small degree by the fact that in quick succession several works have been published which showed the necessity for such a research, and they have made a beginning—to some extent from the other side. The solution of the problem offered by "Formgeschichte" was immediately voiced in many different ways, and it was supported by a criticism which began in a vigorous and, for the most part, perspicacious manner. It is due to these facts that the questions which were raised by the first edition of this book, and especially by Rudolf Bultmann (in application to the whole synoptic tradition), were not

allowed to rest, but compelled us ever and again to test the methods as well as the individual results.

The method of Form-criticism would be completely misjudged if it were regarded as originating in a flirtation with æsthetic standards. In so doing we should be going back to a way of looking at things which has its justification only in literature proper, where individual ability and inclination shape the style, i.e., where the result requires an æsthetic judgment of a personal and creative character. But the popular writings with which we are concerned have no such an individual source. The style which it is our part to observe is "a sociological result".

Of course, in saying this, it must be understood that the conception of "style" is not meant in the narrow sense which deals only with vocabulary and construction. Rather under the word "style" must be understood the whole way of speaking which, at least in the case of popular writing, is determinative of its category, for the lowly people who use this style write according to laws which are independent of the individual personality. Hence the style characterizes the category. In certain circumstances also by taking account of the choice of words, the construction of sentences, the wordiness or the brevity, the nature of the description, the introduction, and the peroration, we may tell whether the purpose of the author is to awaken interest or to make converts.

Further, the categories enable us to draw a conclusion as to what is called the "Sitz im Leben", i.e. the historical and social stratum in which precisely these literary forms were developed. Devotional narratives were required by devotional addresses, but interesting and arresting narratives live and do their work by themselves and require, in certain circumstances, no context.

In these cases our enquiry is not directed towards the personality of the authors, nor towards their literary dexterity; rather the issue is concerned with laws which operate as

formative factors in popular tradition. The ultimate origin of the Form is primitive Christian life itself. To understand the categories of popular writings as they developed in the sphere of unliterary people we must enquire into their life and, in our special case, which deals with religious texts, into the customs of their worship. We must ask what categories are possible or probable in this sociological connection.

On the other hand, if it becomes clear that certain categories are contained in the majority of the texts, we must measure them up by those researches and determine whether they reveal relationships to particular modes of life and of worship. That research and this determination together constitute our problem.