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CHAPTER I

Practical Criticism and 'Method'

The commonest expectation of students starting a practical criticism course is that they will be given a method of criticism, with its own terminology, categories and correct procedures which, if consistently applied, will allow them to deal competently with any poem or prose passage. Unfamiliarity with literature, and a sense of helplessness, especially when dealing with poetry, often show themselves in this notion of a *mystique* of practical criticism—as though there was a secret process which would, when mastered, make understanding literature easy. But a good reader of literature is not one who has a series of categories to fit poems (or prose) into, or a special vocabulary to describe them. He does not carry an apparatus of terminology and method around in his head. He is a good reader partly because he can respond to the unfamiliar, for which there can be no previously worked-out critical account. There is no knowing beforehand with literature just how we shall be expected to respond, and the demand for an all-competent systematic procedure is one that practical criticism can never properly meet. One of I. A. Richards's best remarks in his book *Practical Criticism* is that rules of metre and scansion are popular with students because they are, or appear to be, capable of external application: they *look* as though one can use them without the trouble of entering imaginatively into a poem. Terms like imagery, metaphor, alliteration and so on have a seductive air of being the clues to poetry, but excogitating meanings for these words and fitting them into a theory of poetry or a method of reading will not make us better readers. Strict definitions are only likely to get in the way.

To clear the air of the misleading suggestions of the word 'method' and to remind ourselves of how little, in reading a poem or novel, we are applying a rehearsed procedure, there is no better place to go than the opening paragraph of

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D. H. Lawrence's essay on Galsworthy. This may remind us, too, of how a single short passage, written by a great mind in contact with literature, can often awaken more interest in literature, and help us to read better, than any amount of extended, developed argument.

> Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the effect produced upon the critic by the book he is criticising. Criticism can never be a science: it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values that science ignores. The touchstone is emotion, not reason. We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else. All the critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form, all this pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of books in an imitation-botanical fashion, is mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon...A critic must be able to *feel* the impact of a work of art in all its complexity and force. To do so, he must be a man of force and complexity himself, which few critics are. A man with a paltry, impudent nature will never write anything but paltry, impudent criticism. And a man who is emotionally educated is rare as a phoenix. The more scholastically educated a man is, generally, the more he is an emotional bore.

In the bewildering mass of published criticism, this passage is worth remembering because it puts literature and criticism in a true light. Generalised though it is, the spirit and the wording of it are so exactly right that to have it at the back of one's mind is to have an insurance against half-hearted, inattentive reading. It is impossible not to feel a call to be quick and generous in response—as, we sense in reading the passage, Lawrence is himself.

Lawrence is probably justified in implying that a lot of the more elaborate critical analysis we read is the work of critics who are more interested in their own ideas, in their own expertise, than in what they feel about a novel or poem. But there can still be a kind of critical analysis of literature in which the emotional impact does not get lost in clever (or solemn) technical talk—a detailed, extended, argued discussion in which 'method' or procedure does not take control of the interest and in which the mind of the critic remains completely subservient to the experience of reading the work he is talking about. This sort of discussion, vitally important to the

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teacher and student of literature, has been very convincingly described by F. R. Leavis in *Education and the University:*

> Analysis...is the process by which we seek to attain a complete reading of a poem—a reading that approaches as nearly as possible to the perfect reading. There is about it nothing in the nature of 'murdering to dissect', and suggestions that it can be anything in the nature of laboratory-method misrepresent it entirely. We can have the poem only by an inner kind of possession; it is 'there' for analysis only in so far as we are responding appropriately to the words on the page. In pointing to them (and there is nothing else to point to) what we are doing is to bring into sharp focus in turn, this, that and the other detail, juncture or relation in our total response; or (since 'sharp focus' may be a misleading account of the kind of attention sometimes required), what we are doing is to dwell with a deliberate, considering responsiveness on this, that or the other node or focal point in the complete organisation that the poem is, in so far as we have it. Analysis is not a dissection of something that is already and passively there. What we call analysis is, of course, a constructive or creative process. It is a more deliberate following-through of that process of creation in response to the poet's words which reading is. It is a re-creation in which, by a considering attentiveness, we ensure a more than ordinary faithfulness and completeness.

Though Leavis's manner and idiom are different from Lawrence's, the critical analysis described here is not alien to Lawrence's 'We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion and nothing else'. A little reflection will show, I think, that there is no inconsistency between the passages, and that a concern for detailed analysis of a poem need not necessarily mean losing emotional contact with it.

The essential questions which a reader must put to a work of literature, and from which criticism must begin, are roughly along these lines (there is no need to define them precisely, as I am only indicating a general line of thought): Is this poem—and prose is analogous here—about something which in some sense I can understand and which seems important? Can I respond to the poem in the way the poet wants me to respond? Can I in a way identify myself with the spirit in which it was written? In practice the implications of these questions are infinitely various—we cannot tell beforehand just how we will have to respond, there can be no adequate previously learned

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formula to tell us, and we may have to do any number of things to find the answers. But at some point these general questions must turn into more particular questions, like: What is gained by this effect? Does this detail seem successful? Does it relate meaningfully to a general effect? What, precisely, is the intention here, how are we to take this? In other words, to discover where our real preferences lie often involves a searching, exacting appraisal of everything that makes up the total effect of the poem, and Leavis's description of critical analysis suggests very well the alert, questioning attention that poetry usually needs. An inexperienced reader, when first asked to say what he thinks of a poem, will, if he has read it cursorily, usually fall into mere assertion—I like this, this appeals to me, and so on. But we haven't really read a poem until we know what we like about it more fully than this. Reflecting on a poem, deciding just where we stand in relation to it, and finding the right language to express ourselves about it, are essential parts of reading the poem. We recognise this, in a way, when we say that a poem has 'come home' to us some time after we have read it. What we mean is that we have responded newly to it, realising just what it is that we like about it, and that a vivid and accurate description of what we like has come to us as part of this realisation. If we are genuinly moved by literature we shall be able to find a sharper, more strongly felt description than 'I like this', and until we have found a description that satisfies, we know instinctively that we haven't fully grasped it. This is not to say that a half-recognised response is not *there*—but it is not fully there until it is clearly recognised. A liking for literature has to be an understanding, discerning liking, a liking in detail as well as for the whole. It is so common to find students who are perfectly confident when talking about literature in general terms—the cosmic order in Shakespeare's plays, the unifying power of metaphysical wit—but who have nothing striking or interesting to say when it comes to describing the effect of a particular poem. What Leavis defines in fact is something that, if we read well, we do naturally for ourselves; it is part of the process by which we make a poem fully *ours*.

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Analysis, if it is to be more than a 'pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of books in an imitation-botanical fashion', must be a sort of running commentary on what happens when we read a poem. Practical criticism, at the early stages at any rate, must aim to take students through this commentary slowly, arguing in greater detail than would normally be necessary with experienced readers—with beginners, analysis must be unusually full and explicit. Laboriousness is always a danger. But it is worth risking some overscrupulousness in showing how detailed questions can be put to a poem and answered, how detailed questions can relate to general questions, and, most of all, in showing that it is the poem itself which ultimately tells us how it is to be taken, not the prescriptions of a previously worked-out method. In doing this, we should be discovering a general truth about critical discussion which is vitally important to our whole undertaking. In discussion (the word tends to carry inappropriate suggestions) what we are doing is to test our own response against another person's in a co-operative interchange. We try out one another's comments to see if they answer to the poem, as far as we are concerned. Critical discussion is not often a matter of driving someone else from an untenable position by irrefutable logic, though this may be involved in an ancillary way. Rather, we are trying to discover our deepest response which the conscious, articulate mind, preoccupied with a more superficial view, has been suppressing or ignoring. To make a real change of view is to feel an inner, answering assurance, an acknowledgement that this is what we genuinely feel to be right. If we reach agreement, we shall not have proved a hard, incontestable fact so much as established an understanding, a full and vital kind of sympathy. This is, of course, what the literary critic seeks to do with his readers, and this aim should always decide the tone of his writing. It is certainly true that when we are writing about a poem, we shall write most effectively if we address an imaginary reader, not yet convinced about the poem but ready to listen to our comments and test them out for himself.

With classes the size they are today it is whimsical to talk

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about 'intimate class atmosphere'. Most of the readers likely to use this book will be in classes so large that discussion of any kind will be hard to manage at all. This doesn't mean, however, that the kind of work recommended here is impracticable. Written work can, to some extent, take the place of discussion, and is anyway an essential part of the training, for the discipline of ordering and articulating our thoughts on paper is invaluable if we are to gain the wider vocabulary, the livelier awareness of the meanings of words, which we must have if we are to get very much from the study of literature. My own method as teacher has been to hand out exercises, collect the answers and consider the more interesting and illuminating comments—strictly anonymously—at the next lecture. This was, of course, the method used by I. A. Richards, and it seems to me the only way of handling a large class. It is far from ideal; but the discussion of the answers is usually listened to with lively attention, and, even if class discussion is impossible, the students are in an important sense still taking part. Ideally, practical criticism should be done with groups of up to ten people, but this is an ideal few will be able to realise.

An important point to stress from the outset is that the clearly mistaken comments and judgments which most students, when they begin at least, are bound to make, are not necessarily regrettable; they do not represent dead loss. Some errors are worth making. To make a comment, see what is wrong with it and change one's mind is a far more valuable piece of education than a lucky guess (and far more valuable than to *reproduce* a correct view from a recognised critic—a process which really represents dead loss). Perhaps even more important, if the class atmosphere is to be the right one, is to avoid the impression that critical judgments are cut and dried, absolute and obvious—and in my experience this is the impression that most beginning classes are only too anxious to get. Inexperienced readers who feel uncertain of themselves are always ready to look for an assurance that the rights and wrongs of the subject are clear-cut. Correcting this view is not a question of receiving a simple direction (it rarely is in

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practical criticism), but of receiving corrective experience in actual reading, suitably guided and enforced by discussion. I believe that in the early stages there is some value in discussing fairly obvious cases, using comparisons (where we make use of them) which are as far as possible decisive and not likely to be controversial. The first thing to learn is that there is such a thing as critical judgment, and that critical judgments are important. But before long it must be made clear, through examples, that as readers of literature we are not always, or even often, making 'knock down' judgments. The less obvious judgments, the ones requiring great tact and delicacy in balancing different qualities against each other, are frequently the most important ones. Matthew Arnold once said that '...the critical perception of poetic truth is of all things the most volatile, elusive and evanescent; by pressing too impetuously after it, one runs the risk of losing it'. The practical criticism course which presses too impetuously after critical perception will certainly run the risk of losing it. 'Loaded' exercises, and the misleading impression which students draw from them, are something to be avoided. They provide poor training for the critical sense. I have selected some exercises mainly because they involve no clear-cut preference, and have included a number in which no comparison is called for. But in these matters this book, like any other of its kind, will have to rely on the sympathy and understanding of the teacher who uses it.

Practical criticism, of course, can never be learned from a book alone. The presence of a teacher is essential to guide discussion, to consider and comment on individual impression and opinions, to ensure that a co-operative interchange of views really does take place. No two discussions should ever follow quite the same course, even if they reach the same conclusions; no two classes should seem exactly alike. For what makes literature a marvellous thing to teach—though it may make it difficult to regulate on academic lines—is that no discussion of a good poem can be inclusively final. Reading is a process of individual creative discovery, and the individual,

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with his particular temperament and personal experience, can always add something that is fresh and distinctively his own (and I think differences of background environment can sometimes *help* in the teaching of literature, and make it more interesting). Only when this is happening can literature be truly said to be alive. Which brings me to a final point. The discussions of poetry and prose which appear in this book are intended to be *exemplifications*. They are simply accounts of how the literature appears to one person. He feels that there would be little point in writing the book at all unless he committed himself to certain judgments; but this does not mean that there cannot be other judgments, or modifications of these judgments, or other points of view. The students who use this book are urged not to regard the discussions as definitive. I would urge them to see what they can make of the literature themselves, and avoid repeating what I have said—above all to avoid repeating the language I have used.

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CHAPTER 2

Rhythm, Tone and the Dangers of Eye-reading

It all depends on the pause—the natural pause, the natural lingering *of the voice according to the feeling—it is the hidden* emotional *pattern that makes poetry, not the obvious form...It is the lapse of feeling, something as indefinite as expression in the voice carrying emotion...The ebbing and lifting emotion should be master, and the ear the transmitter.*

D. H. LAWRENCE on metre

'I can't tell you', Lawrence wrote in the letter to Edward Marsh from which the above quotation is taken, 'what *pattern* I see in any poetry, save one complete thing.' This sums up the difficulty of talking effectively about the criticism of poetry (and prose, as so often, can largely be included in the generalisation). We can divide up a poem for the purposes of analysis into imagery, rhythm, diction, stanza-(or verse-) form, but the poem itself is not the sum total of all these things: it is all of them at once. And if one of these elements is isolated from the others, it almost always presents a misleading appearance. To discuss imagery without being aware of rhythm is inevitably to get the wrong impression of the imagery; to try to discuss rhythm by itself is to end up with something almost meaningless, poetic 'music' or rhythm as a mere adjunct to poetry, which is the error Lawrence discusses so illuminatingly in the quotation. Yet inexperienced readers are usually only too ready to seize on these different 'elements', forgetting that they are simply provisional, imprecise terms which the critic invents for his own convenience, and attempting to see them one at a time as distinct ingredients—in the belief, perhaps, that the difficulties of poetry can be lessened if the different parts of a poem are mastered severally. But to try to take things one at a time is to attempt something which, with poetry, we can never

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really do: we must try to respond to 'the one complete thing', not to parts of it, and any part or detail we consider must be considered in the context of the whole. How can we best see the one complete thing, and not simply look for a series of components?

The real answer to these problems, of course, is to provide the corrective experience that the students lack; to show in actual demonstration how various poems make their impact and how imagery, metaphor, rhythm, diction, verse-structure are all inseparably part of the impact. This, it is hoped, is what the exercises provided in this book will do, or will at least go some way towards doing. But it is, I believe, worth considering the inexperienced reader and his tendencies more fully at this point, so that the stress can be laid in the most effective ways in our opening discussions.

The cause of many failures with poetry (and prose) is what I have chosen to call 'eye-reading'. Most inexperienced readers never seriously try to *hear* a poem. They read with the eye alone, in the casual, inattentive manner bred by the modern world's usual acquaintance with the printed word. The student, having decided, probably, what the subject-matter of the poem is, and having made a rough mental paraphrase, runs his eye down the poem looking for details of imagery, metaphor—for these are the things he can most easily be told to look for—and does not feel the movement of the verse. This process of picking things out of the poem for inspection without hearing the poem is fatal, and causes more trouble than perhaps any other error. The tone, the emotional atmosphere of a poem will never be caught properly in this kind of a reading, which can lead to the most unbelievable misconceptions of the poet's intention; and I think that no one who reads in this fashion was ever strongly moved by what he read. How little beginning students hear what they read is well suggested by the fact that many errors of interpretation can be corrected simply by reading out the poem or hearing it read—a method which may prove far quicker and more convincing than any amount of extended argument. Reading aloud is, of course, difficult, and few

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