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THE PRACTICE OF CRITICISM

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Preface

AIMS AND INTENTIONS

> *I think it certain, that most men are naturally not only capable of being pleased with that which raises agreeable pictures in the fancy but willing also to own it. But then there are many who, by false applications of some rules ill understood, or out of deference to men whose opinions they value, have formed to themselves certain schemes and systems of satisfaction, and will not be pleased out of their own way. These are not critics themselves, but readers of critics, who, without the labour of perusing authors, are able to give their characters in general; and know just as much of the several species of poetry, as those who read books of geography do of the genius of this or that people or nation.* POPE

The main cause that led to the writing of this book is the tendency of university courses in literature to turn into courses in literary criticism. This is a problem partly created by having literature as a university subject in the first place. Most great literature was not written to be studied in universities, and there is something artificial in the idea of a literature course—though, however much we may deplore it, literature will have to be read in universities if it is to be read widely and seriously in our time. To substitute criticism for literature as the main focus of interest, to replace the thing itself with ideas about the thing, is always a danger in academic departments, which are congenitally happier when moving in a world of their own creation than when trying to engage with the actual world. And for the student, criticism can provide a short cut to neat, coherent writing which avoids all the struggle of real contact with literature, all the effort to discover what one's own feelings really are and to find language to express them, which ought to be at the centre of a literary education. Modern criticism on the whole is complex but ordered. It lends itself to study under academic conditions so much more readily than literature does. Not surprisingly, most students, under the pressure of a

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university curriculum, find it easier to handle the more ordered reproductions of the great writers which they can find in criticism than to approach the writers themselves, since that is a more uneconomical, unpredictable business altogether. In the feeble, inferior student this is usually nothing more than the clumsy device of a person who will not profit from a literature course however the subject is tackled. And there is always the born journalist, the man with the lucky verbal facility who can pass his examinations, gain his qualifications and be apparently educated on the strength of a thorough assimilation of modern criticism (or parts of it), while reading the literature itself perfunctorily and developing little personal feeling for it. He is, I believe, a universal phenomenon, and very hard to deal with fairly when he is met with. But, probably because present-day education as a whole tends to foster such processes, the more genuinely intelligent students, the ones we hope will become real readers and critics, frequently become suggestible to criticism before they develop a sensitiveness to literature. An interest in the one precedes an interest in the other, which is surely wrong. It is quite common to find students who can manipulate critical language and ideas with remarkable confidence and ease at a time when they are still faltering and diffident when it comes to deciding what the impact of a particular poem is like. Unless the tendency is checked—and the check will have to come, initially, from the teacher—they are only too likely to remain at this stage, saturated in critics but not in authors, fluent in views and ideas but with only an illusion of having read literature. For some of the brighter students, much criticism will seem to offer a recognisable intellectual challenge in itself. But I suspect that the best students, those whose talents naturally fit them for the study of literature, will by this time have sensed that there is an illusion somewhere, and be reading another subject.

Users of this book will recognise in the above paragraph a familiar enough charge against university English Literature. The danger is felt, acutely or vaguely, by almost everyone who teaches the subject. But this is so much more genuine a problem

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than some of the 'problems' that are often canvassed nowadays as the besetting difficulties of teaching English Literature (particularly teaching English Literature in Asian and African countries) that I offer no apology for making it my starting point. The tendency to study ideas about literature, rather than literature itself, is a far more insidious difficulty than unfamiliarity of allusion, difference of 'background' (of which more later) or even hardness of language. A more exacting effort of the intelligence is required to master it, for this is not a question of providing information or simply expounding correct principles, but (to put the contrast as strongly as I can) of providing the right *atmosphere*, of encouraging the right responsiveness in people to whom literature may have previously meant little or nothing. Looking at the tepid, derivative writing that students produce so much of, one sees how hard it is to make people respond to literature at that personal, intimate level at which they are truly themselves, where their real sympathies and antipathies come into play, and where their thoughts and feelings are completely their own, whatever they might owe to the critics they have read. Literature is difficult to teach because it can only partially be taught; it does not appeal to a series of ideas and opinions that can be readily 'learned', but to a more timid inwardness which it it never easy to be articulate about in any circumstances, and which it is only too easy to lose in the circumstances of a university course. A critic, however competent he may be, can never do the essential work of responding for us. He can suggest, persuade, put things in a fresh light, but it is always left to us to try to listen to the voice of true judgment within—to make an act of self-exploration often needing the most delicate and developed self-discipline. This is what always happens, at least, with the great literary critics. Johnson is precise, definite, trenchant but never dictatorial, and we know from his tone and attitude that the definiteness is not there to intimidate us, but to help us to be absolutely clear about our views, and to know exactly where we differ from him. Arnold, by his choice of language, forces us to make a creative effort of response our-

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selves, and discourages us from assimilating his views passively and automatically. It is certainly true that people who have no talent for introspection will not get very far with literature. And, if the creative work of responding is not done, the teacher and critic become arid dictators to be tamely followed and imitated. The truth of this is perhaps easy enough to admit in the abstract, but to act on this truth, and in the spirit of it, is another matter. We can gather some idea of how rarely we succeed if we ask how many students, particularly those not connected with education professionally, ever look again at the literature they once read as pupils after they have left the university.

So much seems to stand in the way of our making the study of literature the personal and intimate thing it ought to be: the huge numbers that have to be taught, the little inclination there generally is to make efforts in the right direction, the strong inclination, sometimes, to make efforts in the wrong direction, and perhaps even the high professional prestige of published criticism in the academic world. A good deal of the material now being put out to help students, in the form of exhaustive analyses of different works, seems to me only likely to make the right kind of effort more difficult. Implicitly offering to tell him all he needs to know about a poem, play or novel, these commentaries invite him to assimilate criticism in a way we should be anxious to avoid. Criticism is a thing which, as teachers and students, we need, but which we need less of than we usually think. There is probably as much as we require at our disposal at the moment—or more than enough. What the teaching of English Literature needs is teachers who can use the best criticism judiciously and effectively.

Among the readers this book may find in Britain, some will be familiar with the exercise known as 'practical criticism' in one form or another, and some may know it and have reservations about it. But in my experience it is much less widely known and used elsewhere; and it is there, where the student is usually rather less confident of himself in starting to read a literature course than his British or American counterpart, and

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particularly prone to getting literature and criticism in their wrong places, that practical criticism seems to me especially important. In schools and universities which teach English Literature outside England and the United States it is not used nearly enough at present. Practical criticism is no *panacea*, but it offers one of the best chances we have of making literature something personal instead of a set of teachings embodied in a series of admired authorities. In discussions and analysis of 'unseen'[1] pieces of prose and verse we can, given the limitations involved when we use extracts, reasonably hope for first-hand reactions, and here, if anywhere, the students can gain the vital training in perceiving the shades of tone and meaning, the subtleties of language, which are the great writer's means of communicating with us. Like any method of teaching, it will fail if used badly, and recent attacks on practical criticism as the central discipline in university English appear to me to condemn the abuse of the idea rather than the idea itself. Pursued in a mechanical, relentless way, detailed comparison and analysis of poetry or prose can lead rapidly to that listless routine which is the death of literature. It can lead to an artificial narrowing of sympathies, and can teach students to like some kinds of poetry (the kinds which lend themselves, or apparently lend themselves, most readily to close analysis) at the expense of other kinds. It can provide students with a narrow, lifeless, semi-technical vocabulary, and, especially where novels are concerned, train what Pope called a 'microscope of wit' which can only see small details of a work at a time. Most of all, it can give the impression—and the total impression is always so important in teaching, and hard to correct once it is made—that there are two kinds of poetry, the good and the bad (or, as these terms so often become in practice, the 'in' and the 'out') and so produce a dictatorial

[1] There is, of course, no special reason to put a premium on *speed* in reading, and exercises of the kind suggested in this book can always be given out in advance, though in my experience most people can say what they have to say about a short poem or extract inside an hour, and a certain freshness and spontaneity is gained if everyone in the class is coming to a poem for the first time. Anonymity seems to me usually an important advantage.

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habit of judgment. Such a habit excludes any real feeling for literature. I believe it is even possible to teach a cunning substitute for judgment which tells the student to prefer the poem he guesses he is expected to prefer. These dangers we can only guard against. There are no fool-proof remedies in teaching literature; any means of teaching can be turned into a meaningless routine if used unimaginatively. But what practical criticism does offer, and offer superbly if it is taught well, is a chance to ask in the simplest, most direct and practical way (and later in increasingly complex ways) what reading a poem involves, and what it is like to make personal decisions about poetry. In this, of course, it is not really to be distinguished from the work we do in other courses, but practical criticism affords an opportunity to concentrate on the question of how to read literature which the student, at the start of his university education, or late in his secondary education, urgently needs.

The phrase 'practical criticism' is nowadays threadbare and stale, and it is tempting to look for another phrase to do the same work. Rather than do this, however, I would like to quote, from a critic who wrote before the phrase became current, a passage which seems to me as good a description of the *raison d'être* of practical criticism as can be found. Arnold, in his *Last Words On Translating Homer*, says of the criticism of poetry that

> To press to the sense of the thing itself with which one is dealing, not to go off on some collateral issue about the thing, is the hardest matter in the world...The critic of poetry should have the finest tact, the nicest moderation, the most free, flexible and elastic spirit imaginable...The less he can deal with his object simply and freely, the more things he has to take into account in dealing with it, the more, in short, he has to encumber himself, so much the greater force of spirit he needs to retain his elasticity. But one cannot exactly have this greater force by wishing for it; so, for the force of spirit he has, the load put upon it is often heavier than it will bear...

What the beginning student of literature needs, above all, is to be able to deal with his object simply and freely. If what Arnold says of the literary critic and his 'force of spirit' is true

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then it is far more true of the student. In practical criticism, which is not tied to chronology like most literary courses, the student can be given literature he can deal with simply and freely; he can be less 'encumbered', in Arnold's phrase, with works of criticism or literary history, with 'background' or other secondary considerations. In practical criticism, where the stress is less on erudition and more insistently on personal response, he is most likely to begin to develop his capacity to read. And it is under these conditions, if the class is well guided, that he is most likely to begin to find literature attractive.

One of the aims of this book is to provide as wide a variety of examples as possible in the available space, and to insist in this way that practical criticism doesn't necessarily involve one 'method' of reading or lead to a narrowing of sympathies. I have tried, in other words, to make a strategic selection; no one can cover all the varieties of poetry, still less of prose, in one short book (even if the intention were well advised, and I don't think it would be). Knowing that it is *sometimes* possible for students to go wrong with a poem because of a lack of 'background' information (though I think the danger is usually exaggerated) I have chosen poems in which there seems least likelihood of this happening. I have tried to avoid poems involving difficult literary conventions which the student cannot be expected to grasp at first sight; in the earlier stages I aim to trouble the student as little as possible with questions of the differences of convention and kind in literature. But the course I shall try to describe needs to be given in conjunction with other courses, and related to them. As we progress to more difficult exercises, we shall have to rely increasingly on the growing literary sophistication which the students should be acquiring in their university course as a whole. Practical criticism should never be thought of as something isolated from and inconsistent with the work done in other courses. I must add that I am not trying to offer a representative survey of English poetry and prose. My main aim is to provide a useful start.

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Preface

Since this book is intended for use in schools and universities in Commonwealth countries as well as in the United Kingdom and U.S.A., I should like to say something here about what I call the 'overseas' student and his problems—as they are, and as they are sometimes imagined to be. There is a widespread impression, not confined to Britain alone, that teaching English literature outside Britain is a specialised job, hampered by special difficulties. The literature has to be put across to people of entirely different background who have never seen, say, a colliery town, a London fog or a daffodil. A novel about nineteenth-century English industrial development must seem ineradicably alien to a Singapore Chinese or a West African, whose worlds are so different from the Englishman's and from each other. And, so this impression runs, anyone who is teaching English Literature in Africa or Singapore must do a lot of preliminary spadework in order to make its foreign frame of reference comprehensible. The students have to be put in possession of an English 'background' artificially, as their own experience by itself will not enable them to read competently and respond relevantly.

It should, of course, be possible to argue convincingly, given the space, that the worlds of the educated African, Englishman, American and Singaporean are not all that different in any case, and are becoming less so. They are certainly far less different than the modern Englishman's or American's world is from the Elizabethan world of Shakespeare's first audience. But the worst error underlying the 'background' misconception is that it underestimates literature's power to communicate itself. Johnson, trying to sum up as briefly as possible what it was that, for him, made Shakespeare the supreme English author, wrote that 'Shakespeare approximates the remote and familiarises the wonderful'; he has, as inferior authors have not, the power of making whatever he writes of vividly and movingly close to us. Difficulties do sometimes arise because of a reader's unfamiliarity with certain allusions or conventions—though the modern Englishman seems to me at no very special natural advantage here—but these problems

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are temporary and incidental. They are far less striking in practice than the communicating, creative force of literature which Johnson felt so strongly in Shakespeare and described so memorably. Great literature surely *is* great partly because its appeal is not limited to one time or place. I believe that, generally speaking, the greater a work of literature is—that is, the stronger its appeal to a common humanity—the less help it will need to make its impact. And a work which seems to need elaborate 'background' assistance will probably never make an impact at all.[1] English Literature is not as provincial as the 'background' misconception makes it look. In my experience there is nothing essentially different about teaching it in places as remote from its country of origin as Singapore (if any large centre of population nowadays is remote). The reasons why students sometimes make so little of literature are much the same in both places. If the 'overseas' student is at a disadvantage, it will not be because of some foreign, unassimilable quality in the literature. More likely his disadvantage will lie in a cramped education in overcrowded schools, with poor conditions and opportunities for study. English may be the language of his education and his first language in ordinary use, but his education may not have given him a really firm hold of it (though one wonders, after teaching in England and the United States, if the overseas student has always something to envy here). A teacher of literature will have to go slower, at least initially, than he might like, and he must take special care that the literature he chooses doesn't put any avoidable difficulties in his students' way. Archaic language, for instance, and certain kinds of eccentricity in a writer are avoidable difficulties, and some poems which are in themselves elusive must clearly be left alone for a while. But in this, the teacher's own feeling for literature plus his common sense will be his best guides, and these are the guides I shall try to follow in this book.

[1] Arnold once wrote that 'the way to get a great writer understood is not to raise as much discussion about his meaning as possible, but as little as possible'. This sentence seems even more true today when, as has often been pointed out, extensive 'background' research on Shakespeare has had the effect not of bringing him nearer to our age, but of making him seem more distant.

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