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Preface

Students of literature are not short of expositions of principle and examples of practice. What they *are* short of is the sort of thing a craft apprentice gets: specific aid in bridging the gap between the theory and the practice. On the one hand, books of critical theory are available – but such works were never easy and are now becoming both more abstruse and more remote from literary appreciation. On the other hand, there are books of practical criticism – but such works never spell out the principles, if any, underpinning their practice. What seems to be needed, then, is neither more abstract theorising nor more take-it-or-leave-it exemplification but rather explanations given whilst the critical job is in progress – that is to say, in the form of guidance, of appropriate tips.

This book attempts to provide some such combination of principle and practice, as a guide towards what is fundamental to any kind of literary criticism claiming some validity (and what other kind warrants attention?): namely, a *justifiable* appreciation of the words on the page. The bulk of the book consists of practical critiques of poems of various kinds from various periods, all being of interest in their own right, but also illustrating *a variety of critical methods* (for in this area no standard bridge exists for all crossings). But there is no question of matching each poem with one method so as to give a neat simple ‘line’ on the poem and, eventually, a rota of distinguishable methods (formal, historical, social, psychological, and so on). On the contrary, most methods are likely to be applicable to most poems, *though in very different degrees*. In so far as poems themselves are many-sided so far must an adequate critique be – the craft of criticism often resembling nothing so much as a difficult juggling act in which several objects of different sizes and weights have to be kept in play. Each poem, therefore, is given as full and rich a practical criticism as seems necessary, and relevant points of critical principle underpinning the practice are elucidated, as briefly and plainly as possible, during the process.

Only in the introduction, then, is theory to be found in separation from practice, and even there a number of examples are used. Moreover, all con-

Preface

cepts that might present difficulty owing to the necessary brevity of an introduction are more fully explained in the glossary at the end. In any event, they should, of course, become gradually clearer and subtler as they crop up in different contexts during the critiques that form the body of the work.

Chronological order in the arrangement of these critiques has been deliberately avoided in order not to deflect attention from critical to historical concerns (though the fact that historical scholarship is often relevant to practical criticism is not overlooked).

Verse has been preferred to prose, firstly, because it more easily yields a variety of complete works of suitable length, and secondly, because while involving no theoretical difference in critical approach (if narrative verse is included) in practice it tends to a greater concentration of literary effects.

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