FOREWORD

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I

JOHN DRYDEN lived at a time when much criticism was written in England. What was written was lively and apt. Yet Dryden was jealous of the better criticism written in France. For Dryden thought well of criticism. He believed that criticism serves the health of poetry.

Dryden's belief has been held by other English poets. It has made them take an uncommon interest in criticism. Some poets have pressed this interest so far that criticism has taken an almost personal turn from them. Sidney, Dryden, Wordsworth are among these. They have written criticism, the best criticism in English. Therefore a study of English criticism must begin at these poets. Perhaps it need go no farther.

I therefore choose as critics some poets, not in order to be odd, nor to give their criticism a weight which it does not have. I choose Dryden and Wordsworth because they are among the great critics. And although Johnson and Arnold said things which we like to hear, they are not among these.

The judgments of Dryden and Wordsworth are worth hearing in themselves. They are also worth hearing because they are made by poets. Dryden and Wordsworth believed that criticism serves the health of poetry. This belief has been debated since. Poetasters have attacked it and criticasters have

defended it. The sides have not remembered that the belief has been debated by men better fitted to debate it. What is criticism worth? what is poetry worth? has been asked and answered by great men who were both critics and poets. This book sets out their answers. I have read the answers of critics and have doubted the use of criticism. I give the answers of poets because they have taught me the use of criticism.

I have been urged by another thought. We read the poems of the past, and we know that we do not write poems as good. We read the criticism of the past, and it seems foolish to us. It is spent on dead matters. It is made with words which are loose and clumsy to us, and with standards so simple that they seem to us childish. We are sure that we have better words and better, scientific standards. We are sure, even when we see how well the past critics judged the good and the bad. We see how justly Dryden praised Shakespeare, and Wordsworth blamed Dryden. What chance made them just if the standards by which they judged were bad? What is the use of our good standards if we cannot better the judgments made with bad standards?

Dryden and Wordsworth did not judge well by chance. They judged well because their spoken and unspoken standards are better than we understand. Their standards seem childish because their words are strange to us. We do not know whether the words of Dryden or Wordsworth were less supple or less exact than ours. We do not know because we do

not understand them. For the words of criticism have changed past understanding. Dryden himself wrote of the Ancients,

> To admire them as we ought, we should understand them better then we do. Doubtless many things appear flat to us, whose wit depended upon some custome or story which never came to our knowledge, or perhaps upon some Criticism in their language, which being so long dead, and onely remaining in their Books, 'tis not possible they should make us know it perfectly.

If we wish to understand past criticism we must do more than read it. We must believe that its stiff and vague words were once as supple and exact as the words of a science to-day. In this belief we must search for their meanings in the work of the time. We shall not understand what Wit meant to Dryden from his definitions; for their words are also strange to us. We shall only understand it from the poems in which Dryden wrote wittily. We shall only understand what Nature meant to Wordsworth from his poems. That is why the plainest past criticism is the criticism written by poets: because their poems tell us what their words and their standards mean. I have studied the criticism of poets to learn this.

I have held to this end fixedly; and I have perhaps made this book merely a history of the half-dozen words which have been the banners of poets and of critics. One is the word Poetry itself. Another is the word Imagination, which has most often stood in place of Poetry. Two others are the words Virtue and Nature. I have not niggled with the meanings

of these words or listed the nigglings of others. Each word has been the core and the symbol of a vast belief of poets. I have looked for these beliefs and for the changes in them. And I have looked for them in these words because the lasting words have stamped the thought of poets. For example, Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* is a frenzied play of the words Poetry and Imagination. And Coleridge's criticism springs from the sudden understanding of such words, which flashes when it is true, but which is often false and shoddy.

I have found the meanings of these words in the work of the poets who used them. It is not to my point that these meanings have often been taken by them from other poets and critics. When Ben Jonson wrote of Nature he borrowed from Horace, Longinus, Aristotle and others. It is not my study how much of their meanings he kept and how much he changed. My study is what he meant; and nothing can tell this but his own writings.

I have kept this book free of the donnish histories of such borrowings. And I have kept it free of the other outfits of scholarship: lists, notes, likenesses, debates with critics. Scholarship is the beginning of a book: it is not an end. I have taken scholarship for granted. For example, I have not listed all the criticism of all poets. Again, I have been content to say that it is likely that Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* was written to answer Gosson's *Schoole of Abuse*, without a show of the reasons which make me sure. There are good reasons to be found in the wording of these

pamphlets. But my reason at last is my essay on Sidney: that the two pamphlets debate two beliefs so carefully.

I have pointed only to likenesses which are to my point. I have taken to pieces a line of Dryden,

> Till rolling time is lost in round eternity.

I have not reminded the reader that Dryden is thinking of Henry Vaughan's *The World*,

> I saw Eternity the other night
> Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light,
> All calm, as it was bright,
> And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
> Driv'n by the spheres
> Like a vast shadow mov'd.

For the likeness tells nothing about Dryden's belief. But I have underlined the likeness between the climaxes of *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, because it sums the likeness of Shelley's and Coleridge's beliefs.

These beliefs are my study. I have tried to say nothing about the belief of a poet which I have not said in his own words. I have looked closely at the words which I have quoted. I have followed their meaning to the end. Some readers will think that the care with which I have followed the meaning is out of place. They will think that the words of Shelley or of Swinburne must not be followed too reasonably. These readers do not deny that Shelley and Swinburne meant what I reason that they meant. They merely deny that Shelley and Swinburne knew

that they meant this, and that they wanted to mean this. They grant that Shelley and Swinburne shut their eyes to their own beliefs; and they ask us also to shut our eyes. I do not know why we should do so. Criticism means something and poems mean something; and I do not know why we should stop half-way through their meanings. I have tried to follow each meaning to its end. I have tried to give each meaning the care which I can. And in turn I have tried to put my meaning as barely and to follow it as far as I can. Criticism has too long helped itself with false poetic tricks and with vague words, Value, Form, Content. I have tried to write without tricks and without these words. I praise the criticism of poets. But the fault of criticism is that it has been written by would-be poets. I have tried to write criticism as reasoned as geometry.

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So much for the manner of this book. What of its matter? What are the beliefs which I have found behind the large words of poets?

I have found that the beliefs have changed less than the words. I think that the best poets have had some beliefs in common; and that poets have written worse as they have lost these beliefs. One belief is that poetry is worthy in itself. Another is that this worth must be judged, not measured. That is, this worth cannot be abstracted from the poem like the

wavelength of a light from its colour, and given a measure. It must be judged, as it must be made, by the whole soul of man. That is why great criticism, like great poems, has not been written by little men.

This belief has been denied by Coleridge and now by his pupil I. A. Richards. They have found a measure of worth in the measures of pleasure psychology. There are others who have seemed to grant the belief, against whom this book is also written. These are writers like Swinburne who say that because worth cannot be measured, it cannot be judged at all. They say that each man must be allowed what he likes. No poem is good or bad. It is merely good for something, bad for someone.

Both sets of writers share an unspoken belief: that only that can be judged which can be measured. It is the belief that science is the only way to knowledge. This belief has grown as science has grown wider. From the hopes of the Augustans it has grown to the boundless pride of to-day. I do not think that it is chance that poets have grown so much worse in the same time.

Peacock said that poets were growing worse because they were growing out of date. He said that poems have no place in a more and more scientific society. This may be true: this book does not deny it. The belief in the worth of poetry, which I read in great poets, may be false. If it is, we must put up with losing poetry for the sake of winning true beliefs. And I should count the gain greater than the loss.

I hope that this book makes plain that I believe in one worth only: Truth. I defend poetry because I think that it tells the truth.

In science, that is true which can be checked by others. Science therefore finds its knowledge of the world by mass measurement, that is by social means. It finds it through the senses, and what it finds is never true but more and more nearly true. This holds of physics, of history, and also of psychology. Psychology studies the mind of man: but it can study it only in the conduct of men. It must set the words and deeds of one man by those of another, it must find what conduct he shares with others in his society and in other societies. It can read a mind only behind these masks. And the mind which it reads is a mind within society.

But I believe that there is truth which is not reached by these means. I believe that there is truth which is free of the society within which it has been found. I believe that the mind of man has a steady shape which is the truth. We know the truth about the mind by looking from this *a priori* truth outward. No scientific near-truths and nearer-truths can give this shape as we can give it ourselves. The rules of reasoning are part of this steady shape without which the mind cannot be. For formal logics may change, but the rules of reasoning are steady now as in Egypt, and here as in Greenland. The urges of passion are part of the steady shape of the mind. All these are true in all societies. They make an absolute truth, which I think is the truth of poetry.