

## I

## THE FEW AND THE MANY

IN this essay I propose to try an experiment. Literary criticism is traditionally employed in judging books. Any judgement it implies about men's reading of books is a corollary from its judgement on the books themselves. Bad taste is, as it were by definition, a taste for bad books. I want to find out what sort of picture we shall get by reversing the process. Let us make our distinction between readers or types of reading the basis, and our distinction between books the corollary. Let us try to discover how far it might be plausible to define a good book as a book which is read in one way, and a bad book as a book which is read in another.

I think this worth trying because the normal procedure seems to me to involve almost continually a false implication. If we say that *A* likes (or has a taste for) the women's magazines and *B* likes (or has a taste for) Dante, this sounds as if *likes* and *taste* have the same meaning when applied to both; as if there were a single activity, though the objects to which it is directed are different. But observation convinces me that this, at least usually, is untrue.

Already in our schooldays some of us were making our first responses to good literature. Others, and

these the majority, were reading, at school, *The Captain*, and, at home, short-lived novels from the circulating library. But it was apparent then that the majority did not ‘like’ their fare in the way we ‘liked’ ours. It is apparent still. The differences leap to the eye.

In the first place, the majority never read anything twice. The sure mark of an unliterary man is that he considers ‘I’ve read it already’ to be a conclusive argument against reading a work. We have all known women who remembered a novel so dimly that they had to stand for half an hour in the library skimming through it before they were certain they had once read it. But the moment they became certain, they rejected it immediately. It was for them dead, like a burnt-out match, an old railway ticket, or yesterday’s paper; they had already used it. Those who read great works, on the other hand, will read the same work ten, twenty or thirty times during the course of their life.

Secondly, the majority, though they are sometimes frequent readers, do not set much store by reading. They turn to it as a last resource. They abandon it with alacrity as soon as any alternative pastime turns up. It is kept for railway journeys, illnesses, odd moments of enforced solitude, or for the process called ‘reading oneself to sleep’. They sometimes combine it with desultory conversation; often, with listening to the radio. But literary people are always looking for leisure and silence in which to

read and do so with their whole attention. When they are denied such attentive and undisturbed reading even for a few days they feel impoverished.

Thirdly, the first reading of some literary work is often, to the literary, an experience so momentous that only experiences of love, religion, or bereavement can furnish a standard of comparison. Their whole consciousness is changed. They have become what they were not before. But there is no sign of anything like this among the other sort of readers. When they have finished the story or the novel, nothing much, or nothing at all, seems to have happened to them.

Finally, and as a natural result of their different behaviour in reading, what they have read is constantly and prominently present to the mind of the few, but not to that of the many. The former mouth over their favourite lines and stanzas in solitude. Scenes and characters from books provide them with a sort of iconography by which they interpret or sum up their own experience. They talk to one another about books, often and at length. The latter seldom think or talk of their reading.

It is pretty clear that the majority, if they spoke without passion and were fully articulate, would not accuse us of liking the wrong books, but of making such a fuss about any books at all. We treat as a main ingredient in our well-being something which to them is marginal. Hence to say simply that they like one thing and we another is to leave out nearly



the whole of the facts. If *like* is the correct word for what they do to books, some other word must be found for what we do. Or, conversely, if we *like* our kind of book we must not say that they *like* any book. If the few have 'good taste', then we may have to say that no such thing as 'bad taste' exists: for the inclination which the many have to their sort of reading is not the same thing and, if the word were univocally used, would not be called taste at all.

Though I shall concern myself almost entirely with literature, it is worth noting that the same difference of attitude is displayed about the other arts and about natural beauty. Many people enjoy popular music in a way which is compatible with humming the tune, stamping in time, talking, and eating. And when the popular tune has once gone out of fashion they enjoy it no more. Those who enjoy Bach react quite differently. Some buy pictures because the walls 'look so bare without them'; and after the pictures have been in the house for a week they become practically invisible to them. But there are a few who feed on a great picture for years. As regards nature, the majority 'like a nice view as well as anyone'. They are not saying a word against it. But to make the landscapes a really important factor in, say, choosing the place for a holiday—to put them on a level with such serious considerations as a luxurious hotel, a good golf links, and a sunny climate—would seem to them affectation. To 'go on' about them like Wordsworth would be humbug.

## II

## FALSE CHARACTERISATIONS

IT is, in the logical sense, an ‘accident’ that readers of the one kind are many and those of the other few, and the two kinds are not characterised by these numerical terms. Our business is with different ways of reading. Common observation has already enabled us to make a rough and ready description, but we must try to penetrate further. The first step is to eliminate some hasty identifications of the ‘few’ and the ‘many’.

Some critics write of those who constitute the literary ‘many’ as if they belonged to the many in every respect, and indeed to the rabble. They accuse them of illiteracy, barbarism, ‘crass’, ‘crude’ and ‘stock’ responses which (it is suggested) must make them clumsy and insensitive in all the relations of life and render them a permanent danger to civilisation. It sometimes sounds as if the reading of ‘popular’ fiction involved moral turpitude. I do not find this borne out by experience. I have a notion that these ‘many’ include certain people who are equal or superior to some of the few in psychological health, in moral virtue, practical prudence, good manners, and general adaptability. And we all know very well that we, the literary, include no small

percentage of the ignorant, the caddish, the stunted, the warped, and the truculent. With the hasty and wholesale *apartheid* of those who ignore this we must have nothing to do.

If it had no other defect it would still be too diagrammatic. The two sorts of readers are not cut off by immovable barriers. Individuals who once belonged to the many are converted and join the few. Others desert from the few to the many, as we often sadly discover on meeting an old schoolfellow. Those who are on the ‘popular’ level as regards one art may be deeply appreciative of another; musicians sometimes have deplorable preferences in poetry. And many whose responses to all the arts are trivial may yet be people of great intelligence, learning and subtlety.

This latter phenomenon does not surprise us much because their learning is of a different sort from ours, and the subtlety of a philosopher or physicist is different from that of a literary person. What is more surprising and disquieting is the fact that those who might be expected *ex officio* to have a profound and permanent appreciation of literature may in reality have nothing of the sort. They are mere professionals. Perhaps they once had the full response, but the ‘hammer, hammer, hammer on the hard, high road’ has long since dinned it out of them. I am thinking of unfortunate scholars in foreign universities who cannot ‘hold down their jobs’ unless they repeatedly publish articles each of



which must say, or seem to say, something new about some literary work; or of overworked reviewers, getting through novel after novel as quickly as they can, like a schoolboy doing his 'prep'. For such people reading often becomes mere work. The text before them comes to exist not in its own right but simply as raw material; clay out of which they can complete their tale of bricks. Accordingly we often find that in their leisure hours they read, if at all, as the many read. I well remember the snub I once got from a man to whom, as we came away from an examiners' meeting, I tactlessly mentioned a great poet on whom several candidates had written answers. His attitude (I've forgotten the words) might be expressed in the form 'Good God, man, do you want to go on *after hours*? Didn't you hear the hooter blow?' For those who are reduced to this condition by economic necessity and overwork I have nothing but sympathy. Unfortunately, ambition and combativeness can also produce it. And, however it is produced, it destroys appreciation. The 'few' whom we are seeking cannot be identified with the *cognoscenti*. Neither Gigadibs nor Dryasdust is necessarily among them.

Still less is the status seeker. As there are, or were, families and circles in which it was almost a social necessity to display an interest in hunting, or county cricket, or the Army List, so there are others where it requires great independence not to talk about, and therefore occasionally to read, the

approved literature, especially the new and astonishing works, and those which have been banned or have become in some other way subjects of controversy. Readers of this sort, this 'small vulgar', act in one respect exactly like those of the 'great vulgar'. They are entirely dominated by fashion. They drop the Georgians and begin to admire Mr Eliot, acknowledge the 'dislodgement' of Milton, and discover Hopkins, at exactly the right moment. They will not like your book if the dedication begins with *To* instead of *For*. Yet, while this goes on downstairs, the only real literary experience in such a family may be occurring in a back bedroom where a small boy is reading *Treasure Island* under the bed-clothes by the light of an electric torch.

The devotee of culture is, as a person, worth much more than the status seeker. He reads as he also visits art galleries and concert rooms, not to make himself acceptable, but to improve himself, to develop his potentialities, to become a more complete man. He is sincere and may be modest. Far from trotting along obediently with the fashion, he is more likely to stick too exclusively to the 'established authors' of all periods and nations, 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'. He makes few experiments and has few favourites. Yet this worthy man may be, in the sense I am concerned with, no true lover of literature at all. He may be as far from that as a man who does exercises



with dumb-bells every morning may be from being a lover of games. The playing of games will ordinarily contribute to a man's bodily perfection; but if that becomes the sole or chief reason for playing them they cease to be games and become 'exercise'.

No doubt, a man who has a taste for games (and for overeating as well) may very properly act on the medical motive when he makes for himself a rule to give general priority to his taste for games. In the same way, a man who has a gust both for good literature and for mere time-killing with trash may reasonably, on cultural grounds, on principle, give a priority to the former. But in both instances we are presupposing a genuine gust. The first man chooses football rather than a gargantuan lunch because the game, as well as the lunch, is one of the things he enjoys. The second turns to Racine instead of E. R. Burroughs because *Andromaque*, as well as *Tarzan*, is really attractive to him. But to come to the particular game with nothing but a hygienic motive or to the tragedy with nothing but a desire for self-improvement, is not really to play the one or to receive the other. Both attitudes fix the ultimate intention on oneself. Both treat as a means something which must, while you play or read it, be accepted for its own sake. You ought to be thinking about goals not about 'fitness'. Your mind ought to be absorbed—and, if so, what time have you for so bleak an abstraction as Culture?—in that spiritual chess where 'passions exquisitely

carved in alexandrines' are the pieces and human beings are the squares.<sup>1</sup>

This laborious sort of misreading is perhaps especially prevalent in our own age. One sad result of making English Literature a 'subject' at schools and universities is that the reading of great authors is, from early years, stamped upon the minds of conscientious and submissive young people as something meritorious. When the young person in question is an agnostic whose ancestors were Puritans, you get a very regrettable state of mind. The Puritan conscience works on without the Puritan theology—like millstones grinding nothing; like digestive juices working on an empty stomach and producing ulcers. The unhappy youth applies to literature all the scruples, the rigorism, the self-examination, the distrust of pleasure, which his forebears applied to the spiritual life; and perhaps soon all the intolerance and self-righteousness. The doctrine of Dr I. A. Richards in which the correct reading of good poetry has a veritable therapeutic value confirms him in this attitude. The Muses assume the role of the Eumenides. A young woman most penitently confessed to a friend of mine that an unholy desire to read the women's magazines was her besetting 'temptation'.

It is the existence of these literary Puritans that has deterred me from applying the word *serious* to the right sort of readers and reading. It suggests

<sup>1</sup> I owe this characterisation of Racine to Mr Owen Barfield.