

## THE IMPERFECTIONS OF CRITICISM

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ONE of the paradoxes of the modern literary situation is that we have more criticism than ever before, while this critical activity has not been accompanied by any corresponding clarification of artistic values or by the emergence of a distinct literary tradition. In poetry, for instance, there is a bewildering variety of individual voices as well as a diversity of what may be called group- or coterie-styles; of course poetry is written by poets and not by traditions, but our present variety does not result merely from the healthy abundance of individual talents; it comprises utterly different solutions to the same fundamental problems, as in the contrast between the deliberately pedantic nicety in the use of words of Mr Empson and his followers, where the single irony or ambiguity is everything, and the blurred use of epithets for their vague suggestiveness in the verse of Miss Edith Sitwell and Mr W. R. Rodgers. In earlier periods, as in our neo-classical age, such intense critical activity was often the prelude to the emergence of a poetic school with a common programme.

To turn to the critics themselves, their numbers, the authority they command, and the extreme sophistication of literary argument to which they have accustomed us, would suggest that we are entering upon an Alexandrian age. To remark this now strikes a respectably commonplace, almost a trite, note; but until comparatively recently it would have been quite impossible to think in this manner. Thirty-four years ago in *The Sacred Wood* Mr T. S. Eliot deplored the lack of trained second-order minds on the English literary scene (he was at pains to indicate that his use of the term 'second-order' was in no sense derogatory). The creative genius, he maintained, could always look after himself, but what were needed were the critical minds who would, through an intelligent periodical press, preserve tradition (if there were a good one to preserve) and assist in the rapid circulation of ideas. In the first essay in the book, 'The Perfect Critic', he defined the true task of the critic as the application of the disinterested intelligence to literature without any intervention of personal emotion;

the critic, assuming the gift of his superior sensibility, should present the ordered structure which his perceptions of the literary work compose in his mind; he has nothing to do with that type of literary appreciation which seeks by a kind of second-hand poetry to communicate the excitement felt in the presence of a particular literary work, or with any ulterior historical or philosophical purpose. For him 'the end of the enjoyment of poetry is a pure contemplation from which all the accidents of personal emotion are removed'. The ideal critic is simply the pure intelligence in action upon literature. It is a complementary aspect of the intelligence which creates literature, and in so far as it has any purpose outside itself it is to make easier the continuing task of the creator. Mr Eliot quotes, although he is also careful to qualify, an earlier statement of his own: 'The poetic critic is criticizing poetry in order to create poetry'. And of course the critic and the creative artist may frequently be the same person.

That was in 1920. If Mr Eliot looks round him today he will see no lack of trained second-order minds or of poet-critics. A great revolution has taken place and it is largely owing to his criticism and practice that the new order of things has been so effectively established. The false distinction between artistic creation as a matter of the emotions and some such concept as 'arid cleverness' has been swept away with all the other lumber of the nineties and of nineteenth-century romanticism. Intelligence has been rehabilitated as a prerequisite for the writer and the critic; indeed it is in some danger of becoming a catchword. It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider the social and educational causes which have aided our progress towards Alexandria. Briefly and crudely one might say that two things equally inconceivable to earlier generations have taken place: people have begun to grow up without reading any of the imaginative literature of their own tongue in their own homes, just as they have ceased to engage in numerous other activities within their own homes; and at the same time the literature which is neglected within the family, the source and focal point of cultural renewal, has begun to provide within the universities an academic discipline which looks like inheriting the mantle of the older humanities. We have grown used to thinking critically about our poetry; the vision of a poetry thought about only through criticism, its standards and analyses, would be something to shudder at. Yet as the commentaries

continue to fill the shelves and the exegesis of living writers grows in bulk, some such literary *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may not be far away from our worse dreams.

I do not however wish to indulge in yet another kind of jeremiad on the age in which we live. An age of criticism is not necessarily worse than any other period. My intention is only, by taking up a point of view somewhat apart from the main line of modern critical development, to discriminate its tendencies more clearly. A peculiar feature of the critical movement initiated by Mr Eliot is the assumption that to circulate just ideas about literature will contribute to the healthy production of imaginative works. This is quite different from the craftsman's preoccupation with technical questions which is to be found in the earliest English critics, for instance in Dryden, who is concerned with the detailed recipe for a satire or a rhymed heroic play. The modern notion is bound up with the concept of tradition, and all subsequent thought about literary tradition has been indebted, directly or indirectly, to a later and more celebrated essay in *The Sacred Wood*, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. The idea of this essay is that the writer must acquire the consciousness of the past, a sense of history which compels him to write 'not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'. It follows from this that the writer is never merely ploughing his own furrow but must always have his eye on the shape of the field as a whole. He is therefore likely to profit from the kind of critical thought which aims at evaluating literary tradition and planning its true course. He is never a completely free agent, pouring out an unpremeditated song, but must undertake the next possible job to be done, and there will be voices at hand to advise him on the nature of this job which will contribute the next brick to the ever-growing structure of 'the mind of Europe'.

Now in spite of the immense value of the critical reorientation following on the reception of these early essays, it seems possible that the merits of a particular kind of intellectual awareness have become exaggerated, especially by later exponents of healthy co-operation between poet and critic. An acute awareness of the claims of tradition, far from assisting the poet, may have an

inhibiting effect on his creative powers. This is not to deny the truth of Mr Eliot's general view of tradition but only to doubt whether in most poets the sense of the past is a highly conscious one or one that is intellectually formulated; it is surely often a matter of unconscious assumptions and inherited attitudes. On this point, as on others, Mr Eliot's attitude, and that of Mr Ezra Pound even more so, is the intensely self-conscious one of the American expatriate, anxious to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. As with most new critical movements, there lay behind the general principles of both critics a new programme for poetry; if the manner of *The Waste Land*, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, and the *Cantos* has not become a dominant one it is perhaps because of the curious anomalies of a 'traditional' mode of writing so self-conscious that it may remind us of the campus announcement in the story: 'this tradition will start on Wednesday'.

But while the concept of tradition was thus being defined and elaborated by the literary critics, an entirely different view of the historical sense was being developed by editors and scholars. The enormous labours of research have given rise to the idea that a work of literature must be read according to the preconceptions of its own day. The method is to be seen at work in Miss Rosamund Tuve's recent book on George Herbert, where the emphasis on the influence of homiletic and iconographical tradition on the imagery of the poet tends to reduce to a minimum the play of temperament and personal intention. The danger of the method is that when it is insensitively applied works of the stature of *The Faerie Queene*, or even of *Paradise Lost*, come to be treated as documents of a certain historical sensibility or world-view; it has been the fate of Milton's epic, first, to be cold-shouldered for being outside the great tradition, then, to be reinterpreted by Christian apologists as a statement of hierarchical values suitable for the correction of a naughty age. But for the reader, Christian or unbeliever, who reads *Paradise Lost* as a poem, it is certainly what separates Milton's vision from Dante's which is of paramount interest, not what theological beliefs they hold in common; and what distinguishes Milton is not some further historical sub-division, to be labelled 'Puritan humanism', but an individual mind expressing itself through a language at a certain stage of development. However, the main objection to the acceptance of such an historicist view of literature is that our conception

of any historical period and therefore of the frame of mind of the readers or writers who lived in it is continually changing; the change is caused partly by the increase of our knowledge, taking place all the time, partly by the much more disturbing fact that our attitude towards that particular corner of history is not entirely one of dispassionate inquiry but shifts with the glacier-like passage of our contemporary needs.

Thus the historicist point of view, which begins by coaxing us in so scholarly and sensible a manner, ends in an abyss of relativism; it seems at first entirely reasonable to submit to the discipline of learning what Milton's words mean in terms of seventeenth-century usage, the nature of his conception of epic, and the modes of rhetoric with which he was acquainted, but unless this process of glossing the text is checked by a canon of discretion which must be based on purely literary standards the poem becomes a receptacle of limitless capacity for essays in the history of thought. During the process the poem as an object, something attempting however unsuccessfully to escape from time and appeal to every age in the same way, is lost, and in its place are substituted a number of bloodless abstractions each possessing the same degree of validity—the eighteenth-century *Paradise Lost*, the nineteenth-century one, and so on. On the other hand, Mr Eliot's successors in the practice of a purely literary criticism, though they have seen the work emancipated from merely historical considerations, have sometimes been guilty of narrow or arbitrary interpretations of the significant 'tradition'. To have a consciousness of the whole of the past in the present would be admirable but impossible, and the practical result of an intention to do so is that the critic begins to plot his values along a line which he professes to detect, presumably by virtue of that superior sensibility which has now descended like the prophet's mantle to so many new critics. A 'line of Donne' or a 'line of wit' may run faintly indeed to those whose eyes are more intent upon the poem than upon some laboured scheme of cultural cartography. My concern is with the inherent weaknesses and limitations of a method of thought, not with the intellectual achievement of its exponents, which has been a great and valuable one; in the same way I have no desire to belittle the important work of scholars like Miss Tuve, but only to draw attention to the contradictions implied by the abstract idea of historicism. English critics are notoriously empirical, and may

be thought well able to balance principles with case-law, but abstract ideas, when they bulk so largely in one's premisses, have a way of catching up on one in the end. And both the historicist thesis and the concept of significant tradition remain, after all, abstractions.

It is of course possible to suggest that a judicious marriage between the two methods would provide a practical answer to the difficulties: let historical criticism go hand in hand with evaluation and interpretation; a solution on these lines has been put forward by Mr F. W. Bateson and defended in his subsequent controversy with Dr Leavis.<sup>1</sup> There is much that is ingenious and persuasive in his arguments, but one can only contemplate with uneasiness a state of affairs in which it is assumed that the interpretation of a poem and the knowledge of what it means have somehow come unstuck. What tends to be forgotten in this whole tendency towards different kinds of professionalism is the uniqueness of the work of art, and the objective and independent character of imaginative vision. Like music, as Valéry says, a poem springs from silence and returns to silence. Beyond all the discussion of historical or traditional contexts there is this individual life of the poem itself which strives to be an image of the eternal in finite terms by creating a space and time of its own within the structure of the work. The poet does not need to be placed in a relation: it is he who places human life in relation. There is something to be learnt on this point from Heidegger's essay on 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', however alien his ontological approach to poetry may seem to the English reader:

But when the gods are named originally and the essence of things receives a name, so that things for the first time shine out, human existence is brought into a firm relation and given a basis . . . the establishment of being by means of the word.<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons why the sense of the unique existence of the poem has been lost or obscured is that literary criticism is now firmly established as the principal contemporary language in which to discuss the perennial problems of man's nature. The self-imposed restrictions of academic philosophy have made a moral philosopher in the old sense of every critic who cares to try his hand. For those of us, however, who already possess definite

<sup>1</sup> In *Essays in Criticism*, January, 1953.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being* (Vision Press, 1949).

religious beliefs, there should be less temptation to look in literature for the answers to ethical and metaphysical problems and to treat the work of art as if it could be adequately paraphrased in some discursive message. The poem aims at a perfection which is always impossible: the critic, or the reader, or you and I, have to elucidate that aim and contemplate the strange pseudo-success which constitutes the greatness of poetry. The ancients had at least the honesty to talk about faults and beauties. 'Every attempt is a different kind of failure', and as we contemplate the perpetual tension between idea and form in this most sublime of fallen activities, we shall be in no danger of forgetting the imperfections of criticism.



## ELIZABETH INCHBALD

IAN HAMNETT

**E**LIZABETH SIMPSON was born at Standingfield in 1753. Her parents were Catholic gentry-yeomen of Suffolk, whose simple way of life did not satisfy Elizabeth's ambitious spirit. Growing up to be intelligent and attractive, she also suffered from an impediment of speech, the desire to conquer which probably inspired her to seek a living in that profession least suited to a stammerer—the stage. Eventually, she ran away from home and arrived in London—'that perilous town', as she later described it, 'which has received for centuries past . . . the bold adventurer of every denomination'. As a distinct adventuress she was attracted by the glamour of the metropolis, but she soon learned that there was a seamier side. It is surprising that so attractive, so innocent and so penniless a girl, always ready for a flirtation, should have survived these perilous weeks unscathed. However, she found security quite soon by marrying a provincial actor called Inchbald, also a Catholic, who died a few years later