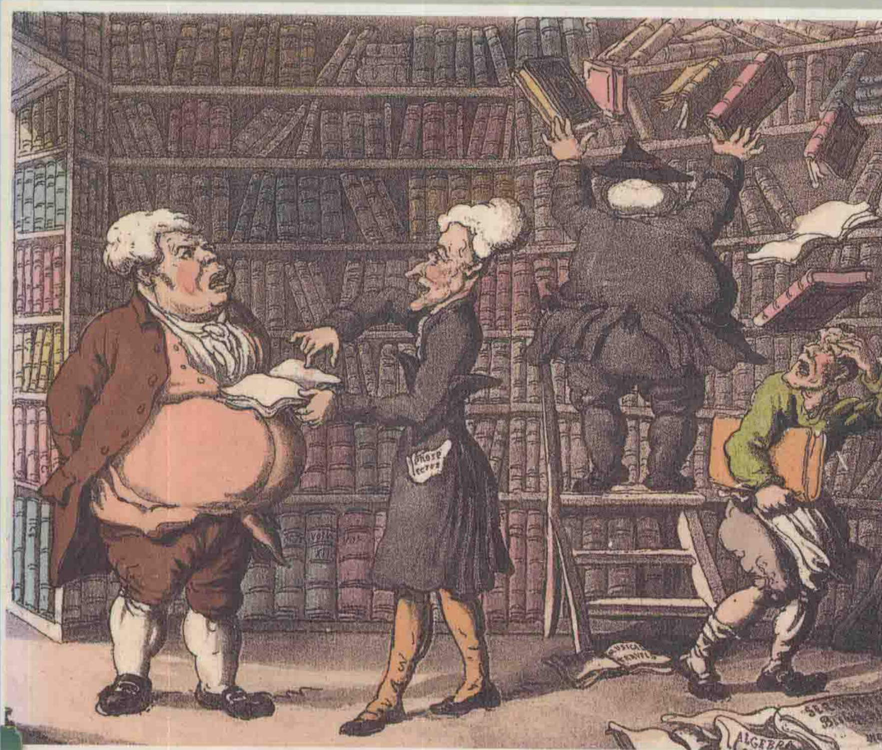
MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

A HISTORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Harry Blamires



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Introductory Note

This survey traces the development of English literary criticism from its roots in classical and mediaeval theory to the controversies of the present day. The standpoints of major critics are examined in their respective historical contexts, and crucial foreign influences are noted. Proportionate space is also given to many lesser writers who contributed to the liveliness of contemporary debate or provided stimulating commentaries on current literature. In this way the significant critical attitudes of succeeding ages are clearly defined.

In the case of the less easily accessible critics, I have to acknowledge gratefully that my survey is often dependent on the work of the scholars who have selected and edited representative material from succeeding centuries: R. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (*Ancient Literary Criticism*), Allen H. Gilbert (*Literary Criticism, Plato to Dryden*), C. Gregory Smith (*Elizabethan Critical Essays*), J. E. Spingarn (*Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*), Scott Elledge (*Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays*), David Lodge (*Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*), and K. M. Newton (*Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*). Another indebtedness, for which gratitude is due, is to the 'Critical Heritage' series in which nineteenth-century journalists and reviewers are represented in action. See the section *Further Reading*, for full citation of these and other sources.

Editor's Preface

THE study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote? What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time, or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expression? Are there interactions between literature and the art, music or architecture of its period? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated?

Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

Histories of literature can encourage students to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of the background of their time. And histories of literature, apart from their valuable function as reference books, can demonstrate the great wealth of writing in English that there is to be enjoyed. They can guide the reader who wishes to explore it more fully and to gain in the process deeper insights into the rich diversity not only of literature but of human life itself.

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

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1 The Classical Age

Nothing is more remarkable in the history of literary criticism than the way in which theories launched in the classical age have kept a grip on people's minds. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, writers were still hotly debating how far the authority of the ancients ought to determine literary practice. When in 1789 Thomas Twining (1735–1804) published what was to become for long the standard translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (*Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry*), he accompanied it with *Two Dissertations on Poetic and Numerical Imitation* in the effort to rescue the Aristotelian concept 'imitation' from connotative confusions he detected as it was tossed about in argument between contemporary writers. In our own century, in 1955, when the Hungarian critic Georg Lukácz (1885–1971) made a celebrated critique of recent literary tendencies in a lecture, 'The Ideology of Modernism', he expounded his case on the basis of 'the traditional Aristotelian dictum' that man is a social animal. The dictum is 'applicable to all great realist literature', 'to Achilles and Werther, Oedipus and Tom Jones, Antigone and Anna Karenina'.

The literary critic allows his gaze to sweep the centuries. He has always done so, calling upon the names of Homer and Virgil, of Dante and Shakespeare, as readily as those of celebrated contemporaries. The reader who tries to take an overview of the literary criticism of the centuries cannot but repeatedly get the impression that from the days of Aristotle it is all of a piece. The classical education, of course, long kept alive this sense of the continuity of tradition. But had not the ancients produced a literature capable of standing up to the diligent scrutiny of the centuries, the continuity could not have been sustained as it was.

The intellectual activity which produced the earliest major texts of Western literary criticism was centred in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. The foundations of Athenian democracy had been laid towards the end of the sixth century BC. The fifth century saw Athenian forces warding off the threat from the East when Darius and his Persian army were defeated at the battle of Marathon in 490 and when his son Xerxes was overwhelmed at sea by the Greek fleet at Salamis in 480. The Delian League, the alliance of cities and islands which Athens founded in 478 BC as a defence against the Persians, was transformed into an Athenian empire as the threat from the East was lifted. Sparta was aroused to political and economic rivalry, and the Peloponnesian War, which began in 431, finally ended only when Sparta made a treacherous deal with Cyrus of Persia, and Athens was defeated in 404. After the defeat of Athens, Sparta assumed the role of dominant power in Greece until, in turn, Epaminondas of Thebes defeated the Spartans at the battle of Leuctra in 371 BC. It was Philip of Macedon (*c*.382–336) whose interference eventually put an end to the inter-city rivalries. He defeated the armies of both Thebes and Athens in 338.

A period of just over a hundred years contained the lives of both Plato (*c*.427–348) and Aristotle (*c*.384–322). They could look back on the glorious age of Pericles, a statesman of great vision and integrity, who attained a position of dominance about 460 BC in the hey-day of Athenian power. A man who numbered Sophocles and Herodotus among his acquaintances, he sought to establish an ideal democracy and to leave a legacy of public works. The Parthenon was erected between 447 and 438. But at least as relevant to us here as the great events of those days on the political and military scene is the rich literary inheritance which Plato's contemporaries received from the past. Homer's dates are not known, and scholars have variously placed him in the ninth and in the seventh century BC. Hesiod, the author of *Works and Days*, wrote a little later than Homer. It has been claimed that the history of literary criticism began when Xenophanes (b. *c*.570) took issue with the disrespectful representation of gods in Homer and Hesiod, and when Theagenes (*fl.* *c*.525)

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pressed for allegorical interpretation of Homer, seeing his gods and goddesses as symbols of human attributes and natural elements. Herodotus (*c*.484–*c*.420), known as the 'father of history', wrote his *Histories* in nine books, covering the struggle of Greece with Asia from mythical times to his own age. Meanwhile Greek drama was flourishing. Aeschylus (525–456), Sophocles (496–406), and Euripides (*c*.480–406) together made the fifth century BC perhaps the richest age in history for the production of tragic masterpieces, and Aristophanes (*c*.448–*c*.380) established a form of comedy which was to influence English writers such as Ben Jonson and Henry Fielding.

I Plato

The philosopher Plato (*c*.427–348 BC) was some twenty years younger than Aristophanes and was himself about twenty-one when Sophocles and Euripides died. A disciple of Socrates, he was deeply distressed when Socrates was condemned to death on a charge of having corrupted the young by his teaching. In fact Socrates had only made them critical of the existing order. His celebrated technique of instruction was by question and answer, to probe those he would educate and elicit from them admissions which, when analysed, revealed underlying ignorance and misunderstanding. This 'socratic' method was adopted by Plato. He presented his teaching in dialogues, using Socrates as the central spokesman. Socrates lures his listeners into expressions of opinion, then dissects them, and brings to light contradiction, absurdity, or shallowness inherent in what they have said. The utilisation of this method makes for entertaining reading, but it can easily mislead the inexpert reader. In the first place, there is often a heavy irony in what Socrates says as he leads his auditor step by step into clarifications which ultimately emerge as patently absurd. In the second place, we cannot automatically assume that the conclusion of an argument reached by Socrates necessarily represents Plato's own view. And in the third place, the prime purpose of this dialectical method is often rather to stimulate lively thinking than directly to indoctrinate.

Plato did not anywhere formally assume the role of literary critic, laying foundations for the evaluation of works of imagination and setting guide–lines for effectiveness in literary composition. Indeed, what we gather from his work is that he did not consider imaginative literature important enough to justify that kind of attention from the philosopher. It is largely due to his rather low estimate of the place of imaginative literature in the healthy society that he took the trouble to venture at all into what we call literary criticism. In his early dialogue, *Ion*, he introduces Ion, a rhapsodist, that is, a kind of actor or elocutionist who lives by dramatic recitation of poetry, in this case of Homer's *Iliad*. Ion is brought cheerfully and confidently into the company of Socrates, having just won first prize for his performance at the games. Socrates plays with him verbally like a cat with a mouse. Ion claims a special enthusiasm for Homer and a special ability in doing justice to his work. Is this just a matter of god-given inspiration, Socrates wants to know, or does Ion have a special understanding of Homer? The latter, Ion says. It is a matter of conscious art, not of untutored inspiration. Whereupon Socrates begins a stage-by-stage probe to try to elicit from Ion what the character is of the special skill he has and the range of the special knowledge he lays claim to as a Homeric recitalist. One by one Ion's pretensions are punctured. If Homer dilates on chariot-driving, will not the charioteer be the best judge of his work? Agreed. If Homer dilates on medical matters, on architecture, or on fishing, will not the physician, the architect, or the fisherman be the best judge of his work? Agreed. And is not Homer's concern with battle something that a general would best understand? By such questions Socrates leads Ion, in holding his corner, to the logical conclusion that if the rhapsodist's knowledge of Homer has the intellectual comprehensiveness he pretends it has, then as the greatest rhapsodist he will be the greatest general too – and indeed a man with mastery of medicine, architecture, fishing, and the like. In fact neither the poet nor the rhapsodist has that kind of mastery. Poetry is not a vehicle of learning but of inspiration.

For Plato the dichotomy between learning and inspiration, between what has intellectual validity and what is of mere aesthetic interest seems to be a sharp one. This accounts for the rather dismissive attitude to imaginative literature which emerges in his *Republic*. Here the significance of literature has to be dealt with, because Plato expounds a theory of education by which men can be trained to leadership in the ideal human society. The question of how their minds are to be formed and what will most healthily nourish their thinking is crucial. In short, literature comes up for consideration only because a curriculum of studies has to be defined. And the way in which Plato drew a distinction in *Ion* between the charioteer's first-hand concern with chariot-driving and the poet's second-hand concern with it gives us a key to his attitude to literature. It is all a kind of representation or imitation of the real thing.

For Plato, however, that 'real thing' – the chariot or the medicine or the fishing – is not the real thing. He formulated a doctrine of Ideas, or Forms, which has had a seminal influence on Western thinking because it tackled questions of the nature of reality and of temporal existence which press upon human beings in all ages. Plato recognised that prior to this circle I draw or that circle you draw (with whatever defects they may have as a result of our unskilfulness) is a notion or idea of circularity which is perfect, and against which the defects, however microscopic, of any given circle must be judged. Similarly milk or paper is judged to be 'white' by reference to a prior mental idea of 'whiteness' to which the colour of milk or paper approximates. What applies to 'circularity' or 'whiteness' applies to abstractions such as 'justice' and 'beauty'. We are continually defining acts as just, or objects as beautiful by reference to standards of perfect justice and perfect beauty excelling anything we can point to in our environment. The priority of the perfect form which is eternal to the imperfect manifestations of it which pass away with time is the keystone of the philosophy which came to be called 'Realism' as opposed to 'Nominalism'. The collision between these two doctrines was a dominant issue in the Middle Ages. For the 'realist' the concept 'beauty' is prior

to any instance of the beautiful. For the 'nominalist' the universal concept 'beauty' is a mere name for what is recognised as common to all instances of the beautiful.

Now Plato's doctrine of forms reduces the status of what is around us, in that it is but an inadequate and ephemeral representation of what is perfect and eternal. The poet's representation or imitation of our world is thus a representation of what is itself an inadequate and ephemeral representation of the truly real. Literature stands, in other words, not at one remove from reality, but at two removes. The philosopher will try to discern through the world of phenomena that reality of which those phenomena are the reflection. The poet, on the other hand, by his imitation of the world of phenomena, moves in the opposite direction further away from reality. For Plato, truth is to be discovered, not by fictive reduplication of our world in narrative and description, but by insight into what our world itself mirrors and reduplicates.

Plato is not insensitive to literature. On the contrary, he is deeply responsive to the powerful appeal of Homer. His suspicion of literature is strengthened by his awareness of its power to move and to charm. For writers can demoralise readers by picturing human sufferings and disasters in such a way that divine goodness and justice are brought into question. They may project gods as responsible for strife and evil. They may project great heroes like Achilles as mean and self-indulgent. They may project a future life as a place of misery and torment. In all these ways writers present models which will damage rather than discipline the young. Plato would rigorously control the reading matter of the young élite. They must have courageous and noble models presented to them in literature.

The concept of imitation is crucial for Plato. It determines certain emphases by which he manages to give a questionable status to literature. The first is the emphasis which stresses that literature is a second-hand version of life. The second is the emphasis which regards writers as impersonators. The third is the emphasis on the unreliability of the writer's presentation of life. In all these respects Plato sheds around the world of imaginative literature an aura of falsity.

II Aristotle

Aristotle (384–322 BC) spent twenty years studying under Plato at Athens. His reputation was such that Philip of Macedon called him to Macedonia for eight years to act as tutor to his son, Alexander the Great. He eventually returned to Athens and established his own academy, the Lyceum. His habit of walking up and down in the grounds while discoursing with his disciples earned his school the label 'Peripatetic'. If Plato was the first thinker we need attend to for his commentary on the human influence of imaginative literature, Aristotle was the first thinker to produce a work of literary criticism, the *Poetics*, a work which has influenced theorising about literature ever since it was written. Aristotle's philosophical thinking diverged crucially from that of Plato. Where Plato's doctrine of universal Forms focuses primary significance on to the eternal, of which the natural is but a reflection or copy, Aristotle's thinking concentrates on the reality to be discerned in individual things. He sees a coming together in them of matter and universal form. Where Plato's thinking is poetic to the extent that his idealistic flights verge on mysticism, Aristotle's bent is scientific, and he endows natural phenomena with a validity that Plato transferred to the timeless.

Hence we have the paradox that the poetic idealist, seeking to discern the absolute mirrored in the natural world, should have propounded a rigorously 'puritanical' doctrine of literary value, while the more scientific thinker should have striven to give literature its due on its own grounds. Plato, of course, was concerned with the theory of education and the curricular impact of imaginative literature on growing minds. Aristotle was concerned to analyse the nature of imaginative literature in itself, and not as an educational tool.

The *Poetics* defines poetry and drama as 'modes of imitation',[1] as are music and dancing. So far so good, but Aristotle quickly goes on to make a very dubious distinction. Characters and their actions will be either good or bad, either superior to ourselves or worse than ourselves, and this is what distinguishes tragedy from comedy. But Aristotle does

not proceed to press a theory of moral value on this basis. He is careful to explain that in comedy the imitation of men worse than ourselves does not mean worse 'as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous'. And the Ridiculous may be defined as 'a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others'. Aristotle allows an aesthetic value even in descriptions of what is unpleasant, such as a putrefying corpse, because the informative accuracy of the account may give satisfaction.

A more lastingly influential element in the early pages of the *Poetics* is the distinction between three modes of literary representation. The first is the blend of narrative and dialogue, whereby the poet alternates between speaking in his own voice and speaking in the voices of his characters. This is what is found in Homer. The second mode of literary representation is that of sustained utterance by the single voice of the poet. The third mode is that which is used in drama, where the poet distributes all his utterance through the voices of his characters.

After some consideration of the origins of poetry and literary forms, Aristotle turns to make a systematic investigation of tragedy.

> A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories ... ; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

Aristotle explains that in focusing upon tragedy, what he has to say will apply to epic too, because whatever is found in epic can be found also in tragedy, though the converse is not true. He goes on to spell out the six formative elements of tragedy: Spectacle (the appearance of the actors); Diction (the verse they speak); Melody (the chanting of the verse); Character (the personalities of the dramatis personae); Thought (the reasoning and motivation which determine their actions); and Plot (the combination of incidents). More specifically, he identifies 'Character' as 'what makes us

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