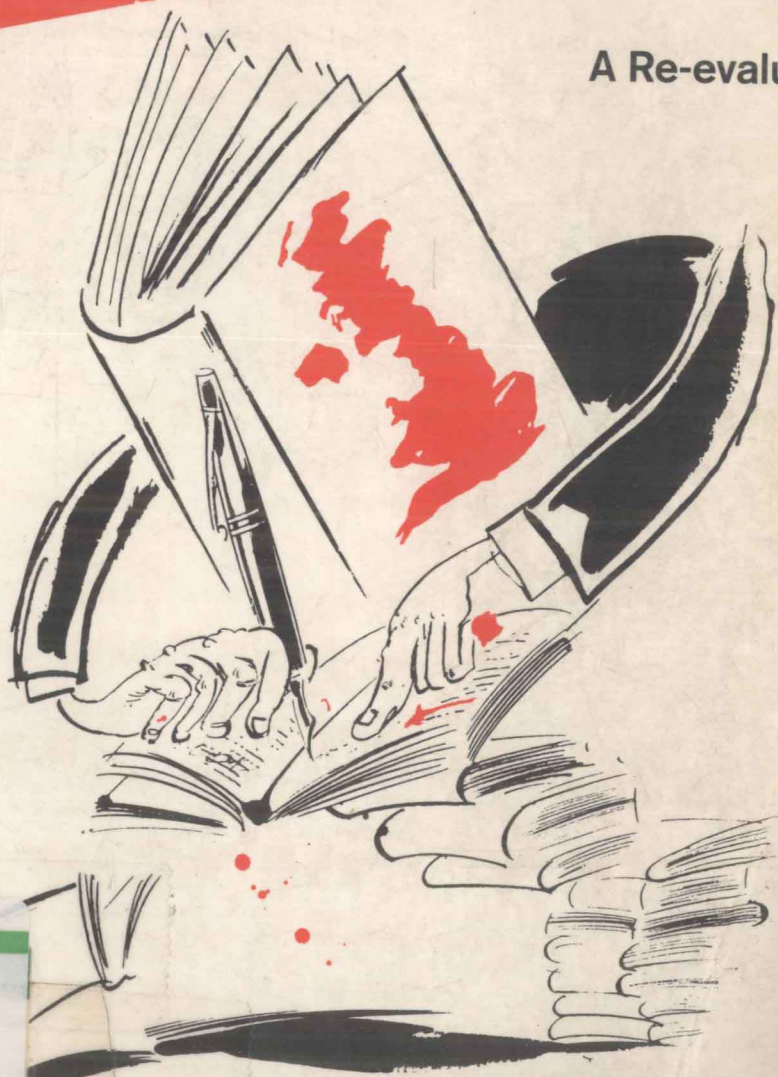


General Editor:
Clive Bloom

Insights

THE BRITISH CRITICAL TRADITION

A Re-evaluation



Edited by Gary Day

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GARY DAY

M
MACMILLAN

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*For Hazel, Tony and Sharon
because the past matters as well as the future*

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Preface

This collection offers a re-interpretation of the history of British criticism by exploring the work of neglected as well as celebrated critics. It contextualises the current crisis and shows how traditional criticism anticipates and to some extent parallels the concerns of post-modern critical theory. The issue of value is also addressed as is the question of the future direction of criticism, making this volume an important contribution to contemporary critical debate.

I should like to thank Clive and Lesley Bloom and Brian Docherty for all their help and encouragement. I should also like to thank Janet Dudley for her work on the index compilation. Thanks are also due to Frances Arnold for her patience and support, and special thanks go to Deborah Griffiths.

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1

Introduction: Criticism in Crisis

GARY DAY

As Chris Baldick has pointed out, criticism has always been in a state of crisis.¹ The present one centres on the problem of legitimation and, closely related to it, the question of criticism's proper object of study: literature – itself a highly contentious and unstable term – or society, an equally suspect word.

The problem of legitimation is part of the landscape of post-modernism and may be expressed as follows: where does critical theory² find the authority for its pronouncements when it has effectively demonstrated that all texts, including its own, are riddled with errors, unconscious assumptions, contradictions, slippages and rhetorical machinations?

In the eighteenth century, criticism was legitimated by the existence of a public sphere governed by the exercise of reason.³ To inquire into matters of taste, to discuss the issues of the day and to discourse about literature all reinforced the commonality of reason and confirmed those who participated in this civilised intercourse as rational enlightened subjects. The nineteenth century saw the disappearance of this public sphere and the corresponding isolation of the critic. Criticism's new task was no less a one than the prevention of anarchy. Literature was to have a softening and humanising influence on the masses and the study of poetry was to wean them from class conflict.⁴ This view was also apparent in the work of the Leavises who urged the study of literature as a means of combating what they saw as the destructive forces of mass culture. Critics were keepers of language and guardians of a tradition which was ultimately located in the organic community of the English Village. This tradition was under threat from the banality and sensationalism of the mass media, particularly advertising. If it was to be safeguarded it was imperative that a sense of 'experience' be cultivated, a sense of the concrete which literary criticism alone was able to instil. Tradi-

tional values could be renewed by concentrating on the relations between language and concrete experience in a way that recalled the natural rhythms of village life.

The legitimacy of criticism then, to simplify somewhat bluntly, came first from its sense of shared values and, secondly, from its sense of itself as a force for salvation or social renewal. As criticism was gradually institutionalised in the universities, the public sphere diminished and with it so did criticism's legitimacy: the critic was now an expert rather than an equal, and criticism had to find a new justification for itself. This it did with its sense of social mission which perhaps received its most robust and passionate expression in the prose of F. R. Leavis. However, this missionary fervour, especially as it appeared in literary criticism, was itself premised on a number of philosophical assumptions which Leavis notoriously refused to explicate. As Baldick comments, his literary judgements were made in the 'corroborative mode – "This is so, is it not?"'⁵ It was precisely to the extent that these assumptions were unspoken that they could act as a legitimising force, a force which evaporated once their contradictions and incoherencies were brought to light.

For the past twenty years or so critical theory has targeted the assumptions not just of its own but of other discourses too. The effect of this has been to render them unworkable; they are shown to be compromised or self-defeating and any authority they have derives not from themselves, as they fondly imagine, but from elsewhere, showing them to be partial, flawed and dependent at the very moment they assert their transcendence. Lacking legitimation they can say nothing of worth and all they can aspire to is, firstly, a consciousness of how they are constrained and, secondly, a reflexivity to be able to operate within those constraints.

Chris Norris is one critic who takes issue with the view that it is impossible to legitimate critical theory. His objection is that if everything is either a 'will to power' or a hermeneutic circularity then we can never learn anything new nor have objective standards of truth and falsehood, and this flies in the face of our social and political experience, even bearing in mind the extent to which it is constructed.⁶ Norris' solution to the present critical impasse is to look for its origins in the work of Spinoza and see whether or not his concepts can be usefully brought to bear on current problems. He also stresses the rigours of deconstruction to show that we can break the hermeneutic circle and gain new insights and knowledge. Terry Eagleton's proposal is to create a 'counter public sphere, one based

upon those very institutions of popular culture and education which failed to emerge in post-war Britain'.⁷ As well as giving criticism a larger audience than it at present has this would also give it a new role: the demystification of symbolic systems through which political power is deployed.

Both these critics resist the idea that criticism lacks any means of legitimation. Norris' case is slightly weaker because he looks for the rationale and justification of criticism through logic and truth and, powerful though his argument is, it never quite succeeds in overcoming recent attacks on such concepts. Eagleton has more of a case because he sees criticism as a potential social force and though this is not without its problems – in particular how the counter public sphere is to be created – it does at least seek to ground criticism in something other than the quicksand of language.

Another way of legitimating criticism is the one taken by this collection of essays which, together, suggest that criticism needs to have a more thorough understanding of its own history. One feature of post-1968 criticism is its contemptuous dismissal of earlier work and this jettisoning of its own history is ironic for a criticism which, at least in part, has tried to bring the question of history to the forefront of its thinking. This volume tries to develop the view of criticism, suggested by critics as far apart as Eagleton and Washington, that contemporary literary theory is a continuation of the past rather than a break with it.⁸ Each essay deals with one critic and, by showing how congruent some of his/her ideas are with contemporary criticism, brings out the radical dimension of his/her work. It is through such an examination of its own history that criticism can shift from its present crisis to its next and hopefully more profitable stage of development. As has been remarked in another context, those who do not come to terms with the past are condemned to repeat it.

Although this collection offers a way of legitimating criticism, the question arises as to why we should worry about criticism being legitimated or grounded at all. The rigorous demands made by contemporary critical theory make it impossible for any discipline to be legitimate, either because of internal incoherence or because of its dependence on an outside authority. But this very insistence on the impossibility of legitimation betrays a desire for it. Indeed, critical theory derives its legitimacy from exposing the fictitious character of legitimacy elsewhere. Moreover, in the progress of its argument, critical theory betrays a belief in standards of reason and logic whose

existence it claims to deny. In other words, critical theory detects the problem of legitimation everywhere, yet by being legitimated itself, through its own assumptions and operations, the problem is greatly diminished.

But the problem of why something needs to be legitimated still remains. This desire for legitimation, for justification, seems to belong to the Benthamite tradition which asks what is the use of something. This legacy is still apparent today as writers like Eagleton and Norris attempt to find a use for criticism. Perhaps it could be argued that this shows their capture by the very ideology they seek to overthrow for the question of the use of something is germane to capitalism; it acted as a motor for economic development in the nineteenth century and helped to usher in reforms benefiting manufacturing industry. 'What is the use of it?' can be seen as the official question of capitalism even though, ironically, its production processes are based not on use but exchange value and its commodities are not as necessary as they are superfluous.

The question of the use of literature and criticism articulates with the Puritan tradition in the writing of the Leavises⁹, which means that pleasure becomes a factor in the debate if only to be instantly repressed. Pleasure, in the form of happiness, is implicit in the Benthamite approach to criticism and literature but there too it is a problem, first because it is seen as quantifiable and second because it is ultimately subsumed under the category of the useful, which becomes more of a means to the smooth running of the capitalist system than a means to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Both the Benthamite and Puritan traditions ensure that pleasure is not a part of literary discussion. And thus criticism with its roots in these traditions, particularly the latter, becomes a discourse of guilt – which is, of course, the essence of Puritanism.

In this context, it is significant to note that, with the exception of Barthes, little has been written about literary pleasure. Instead, critical response has concentrated on the morally uplifting qualities of literature or, from a different camp, how it can give knowledge of the ideology in which it is bathed. Nowhere is there a tradition of writing about literature as pleasure and it is too easy to say that it is impossible to write about pleasure for that ignores the point that no discourse of pleasure has either been developed, or allowed to develop. It is worth recalling here that one of the objections to the novel was that it was an idle, frivolous pastime, neither productive nor socially useful, and therein lay its threat. The problem of legitima-

tion then may arise as a defence against the disruptive nature of pleasure. In capitalist ideology, all revolutionary discourses can be tolerated since they can be accommodated within the prevailing institutions of discourse; pleasure cannot.

As mentioned earlier the problem of legitimation is closely related to criticism's lack of an object. This rather cumbersome way of stating the case overlooks the fact that an object is not just out there in the world, waiting to be discovered and studied. On the contrary, the object is constituted by the methods and aims of study as much as they are constituted by the object; it is an ongoing dialectical relationship. Different types of literary criticism constitute and are constituted by different types of literature in a mutually affirmative relationship. Hence there is no essential truth of the text, only an equivalence between two different discourses.

The problem of the critical object, if such a phrase may now be permitted, has been compounded by deconstruction, which has argued persuasively that there is little difference between literature and criticism, with the result that critics now write as much about each other as they do about authors. Criticism has become its own object and it is doubtful whether it can get enough distance from itself, no matter how self-reflexive it is, to say anything worthwhile. It cannot escape its own boundaries so it is socially marginal, even redundant, except perhaps as a symptom of the society it inhabits.

An even greater problem, however, is the fact that criticism is a *bricolage* of other discourses: semiotics, psychoanalysis, film studies, cultural theory and so on. Each one is a specific discourse for a specific object and this can only hinder criticism's quest for its own object. It cannot construct one as long as others haunt it.

Lacking an object, criticism operates as a free-floating discourse. It seems to want to function in the manner of traditional philosophy as a sort of clearing house for the ordering of ideas and values. It has shifted further and further away from its original object, the individual text and, by extension, from society too. It is now more interested in the world of language than in the relation between language and the world and, in this respect too, it seems to be trying to usurp philosophy. Of course this does not mean that criticism no longer scrutinises the social and political field but its observations are now more analytic and localised than prescriptive and general. Moreover, the language in which these observations are couched has a quasi-scientific character, which confers a sort of absoluteness on what is described, making it difficult to imagine that it can be changed.

Furthermore, it is a language removed from 'ordinary' human experience and, while pre-1968 criticism had many vices, its one virtue was the cultivation of a discourse concerned with choice, discrimination and value.

Of course, this was open only to a few; nor is there any question that literary criticism functioned as an agent for the construction of a subjectivity suitable for the bourgeois state. However, it always contained within it the potential for 'opposition to that state. It believed in its capacity to effect change and it spoke in a comprehensible language that connected with 'real' experience. By contrast, present day criticism is crippled by its own knowingness and sophistication, resembling Hamlet in its procrastinations and musings. It may dismiss opposition as naive or idealistic but that misses the point; it doesn't matter if choice is a fiction, what matters is the *effect* this and other fictions have to enlighten and mobilise against oppression and exploitation.

Another feature of pre-1968 criticism is its concern to construct a hierarchy of texts based on a scale of values, and the most obvious example here is Leavis's 'Great Tradition'. Again, this worked in a conservative manner. In poetry, for instance, Keats is preferred to Shelley on the basis of the maturity of his verse when in fact this was more to do with the latter's radical politics than with his talent or otherwise for versification. However, just because mistakes were made there is no reason to dismiss the enterprise out of hand. The current trend for seeing no real difference between, say, Jackie Collins and George Eliot is hardly an improvement and in the long run spells the death of value. True, value systems are never innocent, but to dismantle them utterly leaves criticism without a meaningful framework for its analyses. A concept of value is necessary and inevitable and criticism, particularly as it relates to literature, is one of the few discourses where such a concept can receive rigorous examination and development. Without a language of value social policy becomes more cynical and expedient than it already is and criticism has a vital role to play, if not in improving the situation, at least in preventing it from deteriorating further.

Perhaps one way of doing this would be for criticism to abandon some of its pretensions and return to the literary text. However, this is easier said than done. Literary criticism has always 'policed' the text, using it to confirm rather than explore, but the revolution in communications, the growth of mass culture and a multi-racial

society mean that the assumptions and shared values which sustained the study of literature no longer exist. This doesn't mean that literature should be abandoned, rather that its status in a hi-tech computerised society needs to be re-thought. The next stage should be to find some way of talking about literature that combines the developments of critical theory with the best of traditional writing in a discourse that balances analysis, value, knowledge and commitment. Having returned, as it were, to literature (its proper object?) criticism should then be better placed to reassess its relationship with and its role in society.

One final word about selection. The aim has been to include writers as well as critics in order to challenge the orthodox view of critical history. Hopefully, this will raise questions about the nature, purpose and future of criticism as they relate to its object and its quest for legitimacy; and certainly one component of that legitimacy will always be crisis.

NOTES

1. C. Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) p. 1.
2. There is some confusion between literary criticism, criticism, critical discourse and critical theory. Obviously there is an overlap and I shall exploit that to use 'criticism' and 'critical theory' more or less synonymously, except where the context demands more precision. What should be borne in mind, is that the former belongs more nearly to literary criticism whereas the latter, though it incorporates the former, covers a much wider field – feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, discourse theory and philosophy to mention but a few. In part, the crisis of 'criticism' lies in trying to clarify exactly what it is that is in crisis.
3. See T. Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism from 'The Spectator' to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984), esp. pp. 9–27.
4. Baldick, *The Social Mission*, esp. pp. 59–75.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
6. Norris's argument is developed at length in C. Norris, *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
7. Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, p. 112.
8. See P. Washington, *Fraud: Literary Theory and the End of English* (London: Fontana, 1989): '[Literary theory is] a continuation by other means of what it most dislikes, ie., traditional literary criticism' (p. 25); and Eagleton: 'The role of the contemporary critic, then, is a traditional one' (*The Function of Criticism*, p. 123).
9. Baldick, *The Social Mission*, pp. 176–8 and p. 182.

2

Carlyle's Metaphorical Dynamic of History: or How to Trace a Grand Narrative in the French Revolution

NOËL PARKER

Apart from specialists in literature and Victorian cultural history, not many people refer to Thomas Carlyle as an authoritative literary critic. He is not many people's idea of a historian either – though his *The French Revolution: A History* was republished in a new edition in the recent bicentenary year.¹ Yet, he was an enormous figure in the nineteenth-century intellectual world and he has continued to intrigue a considerable band of analysts and students. Erudite, severe, dogmatic and latterly bigoted almost to the point of insanity, he was a sage, a prophet of ills in the modern world of urbanisation, democracy and mass culture. He was not afraid to put himself on the line in questions of literature, history, politics or philosophy. And his writings set the terms for an entire Victorian generation of intellectuals.

There are obvious similarities between the situation of intellectuals in the 1830s and the post-modernists of today. Like then, they were confronted by a rapidly changing social world in which regressive authoritarianism looked the most powerful ideological current. History, for them too, had a gloomy or threatening direction. Intellectuals looked and felt vulnerable and unsure of their ground. What makes Carlyle's case potentially instructive for today's critics and historians is that he stuck to his guns as an intellectual.

Of particular interest is that Carlyle did not shrink from writing history. He did this even though he seems almost to have anticipated post-modernism's reasons for suspecting the historical 'grand narrative' – that is, accounts of history showing that it is directed towards some end. In his 1830 essay 'On History', he wrote that history 'is a real Prophetic Manuscript and can be fully interpreted by no man'.²