



# WRITERS ON WRITING

*Compiled and edited by Walter Allen  
The world's greatest poets and novelists  
comment on their art*

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# WRITERS ON WRITING

*Compiled and Edited by*

WALTER ALLEN



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WRITERS ON WRITING

1800

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*also by Walter Allen*

THE ENGLISH NOVEL

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*For Robert Goodyear*

WALTER ALLEN was born in Birmingham, England, and is a graduate in English of Birmingham University. He is a novelist and critic and has contributed articles and reviews to most of the leading English literary journals. For the past few years he has been closely associated with the *New Statesman* and has broadcast frequently on books for the B.B.C.

*About writing Tolstoi said:*

'If you ask someone: "Can you play the violin?" and he says: "I don't know, I have not tried, perhaps I can", you laugh at him. Whereas about writing, people always say: "I don't know, I have not tried", as though one had only to try and one would become a writer.'

A. B. GOLDENWEIZER: *Talks with Tolstoi*



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## Introduction

This book is not designed primarily as an anthology of representative criticism of poetry and fiction. If it were, its omissions—from Aristotle to Pater and beyond—would render it more or less valueless. Nor is it intended as a source-book of literary theory. For such the reader will turn to solid works of scholarship, key books like Saintsbury's *Loci Critici*, Spingarn's *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, and R. P. Cowl's *Theory of Poetry in England*, to all of which my debt, like that of any other literary journalist who respects his calling, is great and gladly acknowledged. What I have set out to do is to collect what T. S. Eliot has called the criticism of practitioners themselves, though in many instances the word criticism is too pretentious. I have sought the writers' notes upon their trades, and sometimes they are indeed merely notes, odd sentences thrown out casually in letters or in the give-and-take of conversation, though they may be none the less valuable for that, since, as more than one author I quote from says, the writer is never more busy than when he appears to be doing nothing and his preoccupation with his art is unceasing. Other extracts, those from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold, James, Proust, and Mauriac, for instance, deal with the fundamentals of poetry and the novel. Others, those from Trollope and Maugham among them, are avowedly more superficial, the reflections of distinguished craftsmen on their art recorded for the benefit of their juniors. And some, such as D. H. Lawrence's letter on his characters to Edward Garnett, are interesting mainly perhaps for the light they throw on their author's work and intentions. I have also included accounts of how specific works came to be conceived and written. But in every case the extract has been chosen because the writer was in the first place an eminent practitioner. I have tried to make the sort of book that would have stimulated me and, I think, have helped me too when I first began to write fifteen years ago. I suspect every young writer

makes for his own guidance and inspiration a commonplace-book in which he records the *obiter dicta* of his most admired elders on their art; and this collection may be taken as an extension of such a working writer's commonplace-book.

I have used the phrase 'eminent practitioners', and my interpretation of what constitutes, for the purpose of this book, an eminent practitioner could, of course, be argued. From the first one was up against an obvious difficulty: very few of the great critics of the past three hundred years have not been to some extent practitioners also. Addison was as famous as a poet and dramatist in his day as Johnson was in the generation that followed, but I have not quoted from Addison whereas I have from Johnson. The reason is that Addison's verse is now so much dead matter, whereas Johnson within his limits remains a fine poet. Similarly, I have not included Lamb, who wrote many charming verses, or Pater, who wrote a novel; not because I dislike their criticism but because they were primarily critics and only secondarily practitioners. Again, to come to our own day, my failure to quote from Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* and Edwin Muir's *The Structure of the Novel* must not be construed as evidence that I fail to admire these books. In fact, they seem to me extremely valuable critical works. But though Mr Lubbock and Mr Muir have also written distinguished novels I think that it is as critics that they will be remembered, and I suspect that their fiction has its origin in their criticism, and not vice versa.

And here a distinction between the criticism of the critics proper and that of the critics who are first and foremost poets or novelists does seem valid. From the former, whom we may call the pure critic, we look for a judicial impartiality and objectivity, the ability to survey and assess a whole field, a whole body of work, and the derivation of laws from what they have found most typical and excellent. Aristotle may be taken as the archetype of the pure critic, and the only great practitioner who has also possessed these qualifications to the full seems to me to be Coleridge. At his best, the pure critic is the guardian of tradition and right practice. At his worst he falls into rancorous pedantry, like Dennis and Rhymer, or, as with some modern critics, the American Humanists

of the 'twenties for instance and all but the best of Marxist critics, he is so busy drawing up specifications for a literature that shall illustrate his own theories that his criticism ends by being relevant to no existing practice. The practitioner of an art, on the other hand, comes to criticism from his first-hand experience in the art itself. He is not so much intent on establishing general principles as finding his own laws and justifying his own practice. When he looks at the literature of the past as often as not he is, consciously or otherwise, seeking a precedent for what he is himself doing as an artist. The criticism of the practitioner, then, is essentially an exercise in autobiography, for ultimately, if he is a modern, and even though it conflicts with his own formulated opinions on the function of the artist, he will almost certainly in the practice of his art echo Lawrence's cry 'Art for *my* sake!' For whether he likes it or not, every artist in the West in these days is a romantic artist. He cannot be otherwise.

The criticism of the practitioner is almost inevitably partial, for he generalizes from his own experience and his practice. This is obvious enough. Henry James's prefaces to his novels make up the most important body of fiction criticism we possess. For other novelists nothing written on fiction has been so challenging or so fruitful; but as general criticism it is, quite simply, biased. It sprang entirely out of James's struggle with his medium, a struggle peculiar to himself; and if an intelligent Oriental were to take James's prefaces as his introduction to the theory of modern fiction he would be very surprised when he came to *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Possessed*. In the same way, though Mr Eliot is often a great critic his criticism gains its especial value from the light it throws on his progress as a poet; his criticism exists as a by-product of his work as a poet and must always be read with his own poetry kept firmly in mind. Even when a practitioner surveys the whole field of his craft, as Mr Forster does in *Aspects of the Novel*, the special preoccupations of the artist are, I think, plainly evident. 'For me', says Mr Forster, 'the whole intricate question of method resolves itself not into formulae but into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says.' That, it seems to me, is a prac-

titioner's statement; the pure critic could not afford to be so cavalier, he doesn't know enough.

As a critic, the practitioner is almost certain to be a propagandist, a propagandist for his own kind of art. This is as evident in Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as in James's prefaces. And when the critic is a propagandist on behalf of one kind of art—his own—he is inevitably a propagandist against other kinds of art. In almost every instance, the kind of art he is a propagandist against is that which is approved by and sanctioned by the pure critics, who are as a general rule the High Tories of art. When a great writer indulges in formal criticism, whether he is Dryden, Wordsworth, Shelley, Arnold or Eliot, it is generally because he has discovered that what he himself is after in his art is at odds with the regulations laid down by the abstract criticism of his day. 'Every great and original writer,' wrote Wordsworth, 'in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished.' He does so not only through his own creative work but also through the criticism which is a by-product of it; for the discovery of new modes in poetry brings with it also the re-discovery of the poetry of the past and a re-assessment of it. How thorough-going this may be is seen not only in the revolution in taste Wordsworth wrought in his day but also in the similar revolution Eliot has wrought in the past thirty years. There may be no reason in the nature of things why the pure critic and the practitioner should be enemies; it remains a fact that they generally are. By the same token, the pure critic is apt to prefer the art of any other period to that of his own. The great academic critics in particular tend to betray a singular obtuseness in the presence of the art of their contemporaries; the contemporary work they approve of being that which most nearly resembles the work of the past. The result is that criticism of the literature of the past is mainly the work of scholars, criticism of contemporary writing mainly the work of journalists, in these days journalists who are themselves often practitioners of the arts they criticize. A creator is never really safe till he is dead. Which is why university professors may now concern themselves with Henry James without at the same time disgracing themselves.



In this book, the practitioners for once have the field entirely to themselves; for the time being, the pure critic and the academic critic, who are so often interested in problems that seem quite irrelevant to the practitioner in the midst of creation, do not exist. Rightly; for in creation—and in this book I have tried to show poets and novelists in creation—the practitioner has to find out everything for himself, has to discover on his own pulses, in his own practice, the validity of whatever eternal laws of composition the pure critics may have laid down. For such laws are always generalizations after the event, after a multitude of events, and the practitioner, whenever he sets out to write a new poem or a new novel, is faced with a new problem. ‘Every attempt’, Mr Eliot tells us in *East Coker*, ‘is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.’

For the reader’s convenience I have arranged my quotations under heads, though in point of fact I do not think my classifications have been tremendously successful. In the beginning it seemed natural to group passages under such general headings as the ‘nature of poetry’, ‘poetic diction’, ‘plot’, ‘character’, and the like; but I very soon found that these and similar broad divisions of the totality that is a poem or novel are abstractions wrested from the whole by the pure critic, and that the practitioner, when considering his art, is rarely so obliging as think departmentally; for, as Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge’s comments on it show, diction cannot be discussed without reference to metre, subject and the poet’s intention. Similarly, in fiction character conditions plot and plot character. To discuss any one aspect without reference to the others is like trying to discuss the egg without reference to the hen that laid it or the chicken that it will become. I have let the broad divisions stand, but I hope they will not be interpreted literally. In many instances, the passages might have as easily gone under one heading as another.

In such a collection of diverse quotations as this book is it would be idle to look for a common thread running through it. But two things may strike the reader. One is that no pre-Renaissance writer is quoted; the other, that there is an essential difference between the passages on poetry and the passages on the novel.