Graham Hough

Selected Essays

SELECTED ESSAYS

GRAHAM HOUGH

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PREFACE

Most of these essays belong to the last fifteen years. Some arose as spontaneous reflections, some in response to commissions or requests. On looking back it seems to me that all are partial crystallisations of books that never got written. But the essay is the most natural form for critical writing to assume, and perhaps it is as well that they remained as they are. The Yeats piece was given as a lecture at an Eranos conference whose theme was 'The Stages of Life in the Creative Process'. The audience was largely French- and German-speaking – hence some over-explicit reference to things the English reader would take for granted.

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Criticism as a humanist discipline

I

To the two familiar concepts of language and style modern French critics have added a third – *écriture*, or 'writing'. The term is sometimes used neutrally, but in the work of Roland Barthes it has a special significance:

> Language and style are blind forces; writing is an art of historical solidarity. Language and style are objects; writing is a function: it is the relationship between creation and society, it is the literary language transformed by its social destination, it is form considered as a human intention and so linked to the great crises of history.

'Language' here has a Saussurean sense – the public, conventional aspect of language, the system described in dictionaries and grammars, the code that stands outside and above the individual user, unalterable by individual volition. Style as Barthes employs it means personal style at its most intimate, something almost biological, a mode of expression rooted in the psycho-physical constitution of the individual. And 'writing'? It is, as he defines it elsewhere, 'the language of a linguistic community, that is, of a group of persons who all interpret in the same way all linguistic statements'. For the writer language is simply given; style is rooted in his individual being; but a mode of writing is arrived at by an act of choice. Not indeed a completely free choice. The writer chooses the social area within which he situates his work, but he chooses under the pressure of history and tradition. He cannot behave as though the whole gamut of possible modes is open to him in a non-temporal fashion. Much that once existed

is out of reach; much that is available is contaminated with undesired associations. But a choice must be made, and when it is made it is a commitment to one aspect or another of the society of the time.

Barthes' argument, brief as it is, sketches the outline of a criticism that could be both literary in the strict sense – concerned with the literary use of language – and in a broader sense a humanistic study – concerned with human intention, with the choice of ends and means under the social and historical pressures in which men actually live. *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, the brilliant essay of which it forms a part, also gives some summary illustrations of this criticism in action. It is to my mind the most impressive of Barthes' writings, some of which are certainly open to the objections that have so abundantly been brought against them. I cite it here not because it has any special pre-eminence in current critical theory, but because it is a striking example of a way of thinking about literature that has no analogue in English criticism. In England when we think of literary criticism as expanding into a humanist critique of culture in general we think of something that began with Matthew Arnold and has been going on with steadily decreasing momentum ever since.

II

> There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. . . . More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.

So Arnold wrote in 1884; and forty years later I. A. Richards echoed his words:

> It is very probable that the Hindenburg Line to which the defence of our traditions retired as a result of the onslaughts of the last century will be blown up in the near future. If this should happen a mental chaos such as man has never experienced may be expected. We shall then be thrown back, as Matthew Arnold foresaw, upon poetry. It is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos.

Poetry (to be interpreted probably in this context as imaginative literature in general) becomes the humanist scripture, an open

multiform scripture to supersede the closed authoritative sacred text. This premise, sometimes unspoken, sometimes expressed in language shorn of its theological overtones, has been fundamental to nearly all later English criticism of the more comprehensive kind. It lies behind the early work of Richards and the endeavours of *Scrutiny*. All that large body of critical and pedagogical writing that sees literature as the central humanist study depends upon it. Salvation lies in 'sincerity' or 'maturity' or 'awareness', and by searching the secular scripture that literature has become the way of salvation is to be found.

Serious and in many ways sympathetic as this kind of criticism is, it rests on a fallacy, or rather on two fallacies. The first is the belief that a coherent formation can be derived from the vast heterogeneous body of literature, regardless of our own historical situation or that of the work we study. It is an idea left over from the days of a defined cultural tradition, a classical and Christian tradition defined by forces outside the literary field. In those days men received from literature what their civilisation had already agreed to allow into it; contradictions and dissentient voices were simply ignored. This is no longer a possibility in the imaginary museum in which we live. There is little that our civilisation is agreed upon; a literary canon that includes Genet and the Marquis de Sade is ill adapted to the education of the guardians; literary canons are selected almost arbitrarily, and what professes to be the authority of literature is really the authority of whoever has drawn up the syllabus. The dangers of employing literature as a *paideia* in our present circumstances are that it will either expand to utter formlessness or that it will be cut down by some more or less well-meaning system-maker to what is supposed to be our need.

The second fallacy is that this way of thinking hypostatises poetry or literature, sets it above and over against the world of historical experience. Society is corrupt, and literature is the repository of the compensating idea. But we have no right to this assumption. Literature is a product of society and history, not an authority outside them. True, it also helps to shape history; but if we are to use literature as a means of understanding our condition we can only do so by seeing it as what it is, a product of the continual to and fro of human and social action, in which

ideas, beliefs and aesthetic constructions arise from general human activity, and in their turn fall back into the melting-pot to contribute to the shaping of new activities in the future. Poetry is not a supra-historical reservoir of consolations and values to be drawn upon at will; it is a symbolic form, probably the richest and most fertile of all the symbolic forms, in which men mostly very different from ourselves have interpreted their various worlds. Poetry is not a pantheon of timeless truths, to be encapsulated in Arnoldian touch-stones. It has indeed a history and a logic of its own, independent or partly independent of the logic of social development. But that is only valid within the closed aesthetic sphere. So far as poetry tells us anything it tells us something that is historically conditioned; and it tells it to us in our historical condition; and this relation is constantly shifting and changing its shape.

It is of course essential to Richards's position that poetry does *not* tell us timeless truths; indeed that it does not *tell* us anything. But for him and those who follow him poetry seems to achieve another hypostasis – not as informant but as shaper of our minds. It does not tell us anything, but it possesses a more mysterious power – that of harmonizing our impulses, adjusting our attitudes, balancing our appetencies. Poetry has its own special kind of integrity, which depends not on its relation to any outward state of affairs, but on its internal harmonising of discordant impulses. The outward projection of this process, never very clearly described, seems to be that in reading poetry we internalise its harmonising activity, and so achieve a beneficient state of psychic equilibrium. The demonstration of this mode of functioning was left in Richards's early criticism to a future science of psychology that so far has not appeared. To see the action of poetry in this way corresponds to seeing the scriptures not as a source of history or doctrine, but as a source of spiritual illumination of a non-cognitive kind. It is evidently close to Arnold's interpretation both of literature and scripture. The crude empirical evidence, scattered and uncertain as it is, does not seem to offer this view any very strong support. Common observation does not suggest, however much we may wish it to do so, that those with a purely literary formation have achieved a higher degree of equilibrium or spiritual insight than those nourished on other studies.

III

If literature is to be a scripture, criticism is presumably its theology. The parallel is fairly close. The Bible is a collection of ancient writings of extremely various kinds – myth, history, poetry both sacred and secular, preaching, meditation. It includes extremely various views of man's destiny and conduct. Imagine it being read by one entirely ignorant of the vast labour of interpretation that has gone on around it. In such a case it could not appear as a totality. No general sense could be extracted from it, and such paths as came to be discerned through its heterogeneity would be partial, uncertain and broken. It is centuries of exegesis, Jewish and Christian, that have traced in it the pattern of Israel, chosen, lapsed, captive, wandering and redeemed; and within that an analogous pattern for the individual human soul. The later parts of the scriptures have been composed in the light of earlier explanations. It is Christian interpretation that has inserted the life-story of the individual redeemer into the messianic hopes of the ancient Jewish world. It is theological authority that has decided the relative status of canonical and apocryphal books. And in a similar way it is criticism in the widest possible sense that has traced a path through the vast diverse jungle of surviving literature. If the educated man thinking of the literature of our civilisation is aware of an intelligible pattern proceeding from Homer to the Greek tragedians, to Virgil, to the Christian literature of the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, to the Enlightenment, to the revolutionary and Romantic age, to whatever it is we live in now – this possibility is the result of centuries of unconsciously collaborative critical work. If Northrop Frye is able to see the whole expanse spread out as it were in a simultaneous spatial design, he is enabled to do so by innumerable preceding critical labours. It is virtually impossible to separate what is actually 'in' the Biblical text from what has been read into it by the hopes and needs of successive generations. And so it is with literature. Our understanding of the literature of the past is a critical construction. In popular literary thinking creation and criticism are often opposed; but for culture as a whole they are inseparable factors in a single symbolic structure. The Arnoldian concept of

criticism as something more than mere literary judgement, as 'a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that has been known and thought in the world' is a recognition of this as the true state of affairs. Arnold's proposal in 'The Study of Poetry' to read poetry as a kind of scripture, his proposal in *Literature and Dogma* to read scripture as a kind of poetry, implies a proposal to regard criticism as a kind of theology. Leo Spitzer has said it in so many words, 'Yes, we humanists are theologians.' And as long as it was possible to regard western civilisation as a continuing unity this was a possible way of thinking.

I believe however that it is necessary now more than ever to realise the difficulties of this position. Arnold writes 'There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve'; but it is hard to suppose that he really means it. The whole tenor of his later writing, even the tenor of the passage from which these words come, is to suggest that by a simple adjustment of perspective, a refocussing of the binoculars, literature instead of dogma, this blurring and confusion can be overcome, and the eternal verities, or all that really matters of them, will once more stand out in their former clarity. I cannot help contrasting with Arnold's easy acknowledgement of disorder the profound sense of cultural dissolution in the closing pages of Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Auerbach has been tracing a path through the whole expanse of Western literature, from Homer to Proust, Joyce and Virginia Woolf. It is a temporal sequence that he examines, a series of literary methods, historically considered. And when he finally arrives at the method of our century what he principally distinguishes in it is 'a symptom of confusion and helplessness. . . a mirror of the decline of our world'. In the prose fiction of our time with its multiple reflection of consciousness he finds 'a hatred of culture and civilisation, brought about by means of the subtlest stylistic devices which culture and civilisation have developed, and often a radical and fanatical urge to destroy'. These are the words of a man no longer young, writing towards the end of a war that had destroyed the Europe that he knew, and his own kind of life. The feeling with which they are written arises from a personal situation; but

the fact to which they point is surely a fact. The Hellenic-Roman-Christian civilisation which cultivated Europeans of Auerbach's generation had felt that they possessed, had grown up to regard as a great continuing totality, has really ceased to exist. The view of literary and cultural tradition presented in Eliot's early criticism is a factitious, almost posthumous attempt to think it into continued existence. But no one thinks like that now. And soon nobody will know enough even to think of thinking it.

Or rather, they will not know enough of what traditional literary culture formerly considered essential. They will know many other things; indeed they already do. Any man in late middle age must have noticed how his juniors, no more intelligent than himself and by received standards less well informed, possess without effort whole ranges of experience that he can only grasp with difficulty and labour. The Hegelian vision of history as the continuous unfolding of Mind is in one sense a simple fact. Consciousness is here and now expanding with extraordinary rapidity, in a hundred different ways. Formal culture in the traditional sense is manifestly in decline, but something that is certainly a culture in the anthropological sense is in a state of runaway growth, both in distribution and in depth. It is not however a literary culture, and it is not open to the influence of criticism, in either the restricted or the Arnoldian sense, as the older culture was.

Literature is inclined to assume an ecumenical position that it no longer really holds. It is a commonplace (even Marshall McLuhan has noticed it) that the literary sphere has contracted in our day. For a time it seemed otherwise. With the decline in the authority of religion it semed that the Arnoldian prophecy had come true, and that literature was become the prime source of social and personal values. But this was not the beginning of a new cultural orientation; it was the swan-song of high-bourgeois civilisation. Even in the last few years the position of literature has been changing. As simple entertainment it has many new rivals. The drama – the serious drama more than the trivial – is receding from literature towards a form where gesture, action and inarticulate half-utterance takes the place of self-subsistent dialogue. Many good modern plays are barely intelligible except

in performance. The great international modern art-form, the cinema, depends so little on its literary content that it survives without much loss in dubbed versions or with translated subtitles. In education much that used to be mediated by literature is now absorbed into programmes of a non-literary kind. Sociology offers to provide what used to be mediated by the novel. Open shelves are replaced by data-retrieval machinery. The visual arts, once discussed by critics who were essentially men of letters, in essentially literary terms, are now discussed in terms of topology and cybernetics. It is idle to suppose that this is a passing phase and that the old literary programme will come in again to occupy its old station. The whole technical and productive organisation of the modern world is moving in the other direction.

In this new cultural situation criticism can no longer expect to have the scope and authority that it once claimed. Arnold's conception of a largely literary culture, refining and fertilising the life of its time, may survive as a pious formula, but it only commands the allegiance of those past middle age. It has little to do with the pressure of the world as it is. It is easy to relapse into an Arnoldian attitude and see this development as a substitution of 'machinery' for the life of the spirit. But this will not really do. Culture has always depended on the productive and social machinery of its age. Until fairly recently that machinery was largely controlled by verbal and linguistic processes – processes, that is to say, which have some obvious affinity with literature and an obvious connection with literary culture. That is no longer the case. Think, for example, of the manifest decline in the importance of forensic oratory. The change has been extraordinarily rapid, and the effects on the literary outlook are profound, if as yet not fully realised. Men still living (it would be easy to name them) who in the prime of their lives saw themselves as forerunners of a new literary outlook are by now the priests of an almost abandoned cult. The forms and rituals survive but their content has been eroded. Old controversies drag on and some new ones have arisen out of them; minor actions are still won or lost; but the campaign is no longer important. The real action has moved elsewhere.

IV

Meanwhile, the study of literature in the academic sense flourishes as never done. Literary faculties in the universities are crowded, and many applicants described as well qualified have to be turned away. Graduate schools are full of Ph.D. candidates. In libraries the dykes can hardly hold against the flood of literary publications. A young man has only to gather together his undergraduate essays and someone will almost certainly be found to publish them as volume of criticism. This is the culmination of a process that has been going on since the thirties. The literary and critical movement that began after the first world war made an unusually rapid advance into the academic system. It is an honourable feature of Eliot's early criticism that it made its way without coterie backing, without institutional support, simply in the ordinary traffic of the higher literary journalism; but it soon found its way into the university programme. The methods inaugurated by Richards's *Practical Criticism* and the doctrines of *Scrutiny* both belonged to it from the start. 'Criticism' was opposed to 'history' as an educational method, and within a few years a large new public was created, both in England and America, for critical writing. Many of the objectives of the new criticism were attained. A re-orientation of English literary history took place, accommodating the most active and original writing of the early twentieth century and revealing buried areas of the past.

This movement fortuitously coincided with educational and social change. First a decline in classical teaching and a consequent assumption of the main weight of education in the humanities by English literature. That in itself meant a democratisation of literary culture, and it was the natural concomitant of far-reaching changes in the English class system. The economic and social developments showed up particularly clearly in education – an expansion of the secondary school population and a change in its class composition after 1942, and a later expansion and change in the universities. The continued influence of Leavis and *Scrutiny* on educational practice was in part a consequence of these class movements. *Scrutiny* was always inveterately hostile to elegant belles-lettres and an aristocratic literary establishment. An important part of its programme was

to claim for the lower bougeoisie the whole heritage of culture that had formerly been thought of as an upper-bourgeois preserve. Lionel Trilling has expressed surprise[1] that so small a class conflict should have generated so much emotion in Leavis's mind. It is not surprising at all. In England the most sensitive of all the lines of class division for more than half a century has been the one drawn immediately below the upper middle class. The years between the wars saw the passing of the time when this class could claim any real superiority of taste, culture or knowledge. To break an obsolete barrier and to throw literary discourse open to wider social forces was one of *Scrutiny*'s most genuine achievements.

So far this summary chronicle sounds like a success story. A thoughtful and strenuous criticism had widened its audience and altered the direction of literary thinking in several decisive ways. More people were thinking seriously about literature than ever before, and literary ideas seemed likely to acquire some extension over the general intellectual field. But there was a price to be paid. The influence that criticism had acquired was transmitted almost entirely through scholastic channels. The popular literary journals moved still in the old circle; they retained the ethos and the personnel of an earlier time. Most of the new kind of criticism was produced in the universities; it was consumed almost entirely in universities and schools. From being a freelance movement against an existing cultural establishment it pased as early as the mid-thirties into being an institution, an institution with a predominantly pedagogical cast. This is the point to change the tense to the present, for the situation has remained the same ever since. The predominantly educational ambience is a new situation for criticism. Instead of addressing a diversified adult public, immersed in the business of the world, its culture a part of the world, criticism finds itself with a captive audience of students and teachers, concerned with literature only within an institutional frame. Its work is formed by the current scholastic programme, its scope defined by the canalised habits of a special group, engaged in a special activity. The readers of criticism live within parentheses, its writers address a parenthetic world. A

[1] *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1957), p. 106.

criticism that addresses the larger world outside has already become a rarity.

This is nobody's choice. In present conditions general periodical criticism is required to be so hurried and so short-winded that those with more serious literary ambitions are driven into the institutional fold. Institutional criticism divides into two branches; we could call them the graduate and the undergraduate divisions. The graduate criticism springs from research. Its claim is to be a contribution to knowledge. But as it is usually concerned with a subject on which there is plenty of accessible knowledge already, there is a difficulty. New *information* is not generally in question. In the first place, there probably is none; and if there were, the result of its application would be 'scholarship' not 'criticism'. So the pressing need is to find a new line of approach – to apply to a particular topic a piece of critical machinery that has not been applied to it before; or to enlist the aid of some non-literary discipline – psychology, sociology or linguistics. Sometimes the result is a genuine illumination, but more often the project did not start from the asking of a real question and its fulfilment has no meaning outside the institutional setting. Another book on Milton or Wordsworth that shuffles the cards in a partly new and possibly interesting fashion finds its way into the bibliographies. But it would never have been written, would never be read, if there were not a prefabricated public institutionally devoted to the consumption of books on Milton and Wordsworth. The undergraduate branch of criticism has a different origin. It arises from the opportunities of the teaching programme. No one has written a decent general book on *X* for some years, or the old standard work is out of print. *X* is an author who figures in the normal literary syllabus. So a new book is written – with interest, with hope, with mild ambition, but effectively with a student audience in mind. It would ill become me to complain of this genre, for I am a contributor to it; but to call it criticism – is not perhaps the grand name without the grand thing?

A singular instance of the gearing of criticism to the pedagogic machine occurs in Leavis's recent American lectures.[1] He is

[1] F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Lectures in America* (1969), p. 60.