

James Engell

*FORMING THE
CRITICAL
MIND*

Dryden to Coleridge

Forming the Critical Mind

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JAMES ENGELL

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PREFACE

Criticism has grown into such a large and yet specialized endeavor that no book can address the subject in its entirety, or even perhaps in its fundamentals. Those intimately knowledgeable about particular approaches and refinements tend to disagree most about what is essential. The subject is like an open city. It does not present just a few gates and entrances with walls that are elsewhere too high to scale. Many roads and thresholds lead in; eventually they all interconnect. Despite the formidable array of terminology and mapmaking that describes the area, no one has jurisdiction over its laws, no traveler needs a special visa; any reader can enter. Yet amid this exhilarating and often confusing welter of critical approaches, certain ideas persist. They change but endure, they never grow obsolete. This book is about some of those ideas and concepts, specifically about their development during the first explosive generations of English critical thought from Dryden through Coleridge.

To look for the absolute origin of any idea may be delusory. During the eighteenth century many seekers after origins and originality—whether concerning language, the social contract, or aesthetic values—encounter the immense frustration attached to that form of intellectual archaeology. But in the process they make important discoveries and create new ideas and methods, many of which we inherit. This book traces a number of important ideas. Their basis might be called theoretical, for criticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is frequently and avowedly theoretical in its approach to language, genre, mythology, literary structure, poetic

language, universal grammar, effects of composition on readers, the relation between theory and practical criticism, and the function of literature in culture and society, all overarched by a sober consideration of the very limits of critical system and theory.

The tendency of the age, which accompanies these sharpened interests in what were rapidly becoming specialized areas within criticism as a whole, is to make literary criticism accessible to a broad intellectual audience, to exert it as a central form of discourse belonging to a wider critique directed at society, its values and its symbols. (Locke, not Saussure or Peirce, first suggests a full-fledged science of semiotics and introduces the word into modern usage.) Ultimately this critique focuses on nothing less than human nature—individual and social, psychological and spiritual, economic and political. And while critics of the age realize that societies and linguistic structures may to a large degree inevitably dictate (no matter how much one protests) the form, vocabulary, and even values assumed by any writer, those critics never forget that it is still people, not cultural machines, who write. Writing entails individual consciousness and will, individual character and the lonely spaces where hope and fear quest for worthy objects. If there is nothing outside the text, then our lives are texts also, and the individual psyche exists in relation to whatever is inscribed.

I hope in this book to elicit suggestive connections between formative critical concepts developed in the eighteenth century and concepts and theories articulated in the past thirty to forty years. Writers familiar with the two historical bodies of criticism habitually note significant similarities between them. Why is that so? An attempt to answer this question forms one subject of this study.

After the great initial impact of romantic critical theory, criticism in England and the United States went through a century and a half dominated by a series of approaches not especially theoretical. Much eighteenth-century criticism was literally forgotten. In Germany and France, then in the United States and to some degree in England (where the model of the German university was less influential), literary history and historical philology became tremen-

dously important. They served as tools to train the first generations of university scholars and scholar-critics. As social and literary critics, Carlyle, Arnold, and Ruskin turned to individual writers and to the vexing question of culture, European and national. However sophisticated and wide-ranging their positions, they were not oriented toward what today we would call a theory of literature. Nor were they particularly sympathetic to eighteenth-century intellectual life. The theories of Sainte-Beuve and Taine relied so much on history, national culture, biography, or individual character—rather than on language or comparative literary structure—that they now strike most of us, however unjustly, as untheoretical. The hermeneutical inquiries of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and others failed to alter the mainstream of English criticism. Nineteenth-century aestheticism flagged in its ability to articulate fresh positions in philosophical or psychological terms. Coleridge, Shelley, Kant, the Schlegels, Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel had established intimate bonds between philosophy and criticism. But these loosened in succeeding decades. At one extreme the literary-critical manifestation of aesthetic theory finally emerged as diluted appreciationism. And although modernist critics such as Eliot and Pound articulate views on subjects dealt with by earlier literary theory, their criticism remains largely practical, or is directed at particular authors and broad cultural issues. The few times Eliot mentions Arnold explicitly are inversely proportional to the presence of that ghost and his enduring questions. The History of Ideas movement, all too brief if one regards it as a movement now more neglected than followed, leaned (though not exclusively) on a framework of intellectual history. The New Criticism was largely atheoretical.

In the 1950s, and then increasingly in the 1960s and 1970s, when literary theory steadily gained attention in the Anglo-American world, it was thus not only a birth or an importation but also a phoenixlike rebirth, this time coming after a long quiescence. Naturally the new creature was different, but the ashes remaining, if stirred up, could still give off heat and light. However, since the vast majority of critics and scholars engaged in the new enterprises that followed the New Criticism were themselves primarily trained

in romantic and post-romantic literature, criticism earlier than that tended to be represented by a few texts and fewer generalizations.

This book, on the other hand, is about the first century and a half of systematic English critical thought. It is not a narrative history, though a dimension of the past is always present. ("An evolutionary history of criticism," wrote René Wellek, having nearly completed his own monumental *History of Modern Criticism*. "must fail.") The stress is on key ideas and debates, many of which have resurfaced. It is not my contention that these ideas remain the same or always exhibit the same names and vocabulary, but that the underlying issues are similar enough to warrant a closer, more sympathetic examination of eighteenth-century criticism.

In preparing this book, I am indebted to students I have taught in courses on criticism and on eighteenth-century literature at Harvard. I have often become their student. My colleagues W. J. Bate and David Perkins made many helpful suggestions, and I am grateful for their advice. In addition, James Basker, Jerome Buckley, Louis Landa, John Mahoney, Maximillian Novak, Allen Reddick, George Watson, and Howard Weinbrot have generously read or discussed earlier versions of individual chapters, providing aid and insight. My research assistant, Peter Cohen, helped prepare the manuscript with timely skill; Keith Alexander checked references.

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INTRODUCTION

The Originating Force of Eighteenth-Century Criticism

Literary commentary may cross the line and become as demanding as literature: it is an unpredictable or unstable "genre" that cannot be subordinated, a priori, to its referential or commentating function. . . . A reversal must be possible whereby this "secondary" piece of writing turns out to be "primary."

GEOFFREY HARTMAN, "CROSSING
OVER: LITERARY COMMENTARY
AS LITERATURE" (1976)

The artist and the critic are reciprocally subservient, and the particular province of each is greatly improved by the assistance of the other.

GEORGE CAMPBELL, *PHILOSOPHY
OF RHETORIC* (1776)

Our concern is with essentially contested concepts in criticism. These include genre, myth, evaluation, literary history, aesthetics and ethics, the problem of refinement and progress in the arts, the study of rhetoric and the nature of poetic language, the link between literary theory and practice, and even those embarrassingly large questions such as, What is poetry? and What is "literary"?

These subjects are, as Hume describes them, "disputable questions" on which reasonable individuals may—and will—disagree. A significant number of modern critical issues matured during the Enlightenment, and they remain vitally with us.¹

Critical study implies a present and a future use. Emerson claims that history's true function is to help us see things as they are, so that we may proceed in our actions more justly and with a hope of greater happiness in our own future "histories." Johnson loves biography because it "comes nearest to us" and contains what we can "put to use." If there were no enduring questions and recurring issues in criticism, that would imply an absence of them in literature, art, philosophy, and aesthetics. All literature, really, is literature "of the past," even science fiction and futurist writing. And if literature of the past means something to us, if it is not mere amusement or useless antiquarianism but is at the very least what Eliot calls "superior amusement"—and possibly our vital, best contact with the condition of humanity we have inherited and will, with luck, pass on—then critics who have preceded us and taken that literature for their subject may offer guidance. They may help sustain us in the face of a problematic future. If we disagree with them, they force us to articulate different opinions.

Eighteenth-century writers, mingling pride with anxiety, label their own time a distinctively critical one. It is for them the "age of criticism," as it also becomes for the Romantics. This powerful self-consciousness says something about their enterprise from the start. Johnson calls Dryden "the father of English criticism," and the breathless exclamations, even protests, of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries concerning an unprecedented deluge of criticism are too numerous (and too similar) for all to be cited. It can be argued that criticism, exercised on such a massive scale, ranks with the novel as the most significant "new" mode of writing to enrich English literature between the Restoration of Charles II and the death of George III.

Thomas Shadwell drily prefaces *The Sullen Lovers* with a comment that his is a "very critical age, when every man pretends to be a judge." Or, as Dryden phrased it in 1677, a lament that never

seems to go out of date, we live in "an age of illiterate, censorious, and detracting people, who, thus qualified, set up for critics." In a rare instance of expressing the same sentiment as Dryden did, but with more spice and gusto, Thomas Rymer writes: "Till of late years England was as free from critics as it is from *wolves*." For Swift it would be as humdrum "to say this 'critical age' as divines say this 'sinful age.'" Both the Enlightenment spirit of systematic inquiry and the bogus posturing of bad critics attract a steadily and dramatically increasing reading public. People want to read literature, but they also want to read about reading literature. Sometimes the distinction cannot be made. Criticism becomes a major branch of literature and critics produce much of literary merit. And the whole critical spirit of the Enlightenment, which simultaneously affects science, philosophy, government, and the arts, exerts a crucial force in the development of modern, specialized, secular society.²

The self-determined intellectual life, the *sapere aude* Kant proclaims, now gains freer rein. Criticism joins those activities of private leisure and social adornment that J. H. Plumb associates with "the pursuit of happiness," a pursuit open in the eighteenth century to a significant part of society for the first time.³ The critical Pegasus threatens to become a runaway. So many critics argue, explain, and fill sheets that Pope, stung by some of them, wittily suggests their spontaneous generation from mud and dung rather than from the copulation of ideas. He calls these bothersome insects, scholars "For ever reading, never to be read!" When Edward Cave founds *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1731, London already supports two hundred journals, many with pretense to critical clout. The coffeehouses or "penny universities" serve as critical dens and switchboards. This age witnesses the birth of modern criticism. Most critical approaches developed between 1660 and 1820 are important to us. We still practice them and, although we have enlarged and enriched those inherited approaches, we cannot claim greatly to have expanded their number.

The age of criticism from 1660 to 1820 becomes markedly self-conscious about procedures and goals. Method and principles are frequent topics. How, and by what standards, should a critic judge?

Such concerns haunt the eighteenth century as they haunt us today. Criticism often becomes metacriticism, a critique of criticism, as we see unfold in Hume's deceptively unpolemical landmark essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757). And this self-critical habit is adopted by his Scottish and English successors. Of many varieties of criticism, all flourishing by the 1770s, virtually none existed to an extensive degree in what George Saintsbury calls the critical "dead water" of the mid-seventeenth century. Saintsbury's verdict may seem harsh, but his comparative judgment still stands: English criticism before and after the Restoration are different bodies of water, the earlier one a bay leading to a rougher, deep ocean. French and German criticism—and also their critical theory—tend to develop more concurrently with the great swellings of national literature in each of those countries. In France a large body of criticism flourishes contemporaneously with the golden age of neoclassical literature in the seventeenth century. German romantic theory grows inextricably with the "classic" writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Far from an enervated or tepid gentility, "polite" literature and learning in the English eighteenth century means what is accomplished, accurate, urbane, correct, methodologically pure, and well-informed. Many scholars continue to pursue these qualities. Most books of criticism now published would be, by those standards, excruciatingly "polite." The term has everything to do with intellectual approach and little to do with etiquette. True, ideas of social class could be invoked—Lord Kames states that those who labor with their hands are incapable of true taste—but the real litmus test is refinement of knowledge. And yet the age questions its own ideals and seeks limits: "Life," says Johnson, "will not bear refinement." There comes a time when the polite specialization of letters may gorge itself like cancer and become one of Bacon's "vanities of learning." Johnson himself, in the *Life of Gray*, freely refers to "the dogmatism of learning."

Umberto Eco suggests that Structuralism originates in the Middle Ages. Stephen Greenblatt has given a new context for artistic crea-

tivity and the psychological self-image through studies of literary self-fashioning in the Renaissance. It would oversimplify matters to say that recent critical theories are an efflorescence of concerns that first surfaced in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But the originating importance of criticism before Coleridge has eluded latter-day Anglo-American theorists even more than it has their continental counterparts. Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean Starobinski: much of their grounding locates itself in texts from Racine through Condillac, from Hobbes through Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel. Tzvetan Todorov's *Theories of the Symbol* contends that modern concepts of the symbol and rhetoric develop in the several decades astride 1800. To a mature generation of Anglo-American scholar-critics that includes Northrop Frye, W. J. Bate, M. H. Abrams, E. D. Hirsch, Harold Bloom, W. K. Wimsatt, Paul Fussell, and Hans Aarsleff—and for others “transplanted,” such as Isaiah Berlin, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, and René Wellek—the decades from Pope through Coleridge offered their first and often lasting subjects of inquiry. This period forms the foundation of European critical theory.

The best minds of the age write criticism. In their estimate it is a central enterprise. Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, Thomas Hobbes, Joseph Priestley, Edward Gibbon, David Hume, George Berkeley, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson: these individuals are now more associated with politics, science, philosophy, economics, and history, but one of their first—and one of their lasting—interests was the practice and criticism of literature, which for them included the larger relation between language and ideas. They publish extensive literary criticism and become convinced that it is a core intellectual activity, as basic as economics, history, or science in helping us understand ourselves and the world that we perceive and half create.

Strong tendons grow between literary criticism and other genres, between poetics and poetry itself. George Campbell expresses the fact in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), the title and overall conception of which I. A. Richards uses for a major work in the 1930s. Campbell says that “the artist and the critic are reciprocally subser-

vient, and the particular province of each is greatly improved by the assistance of the other."⁴ The relation between late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criticism, critical theory, and the course of poetry during the same period intensifies and grows in value. As Eric Rothstein notes in his history of *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, "Because for the first time in English literature criticism flourished along with poetry, it provides an index of altering taste."⁵ This charged interplay of poetry and criticism had not been nearly so active in English literature prior to the Restoration, though it has been vibrant ever since. One means of capturing the symbiosis is through the poet-critic. The English tradition abounds with these, and during its first generations of systematic criticism a constellation appears: Dryden, Addison, Johnson, and Coleridge shine with first magnitude. We could, without violating the poet-critic label, include Pope, Joseph Warton, Fielding, Young, Beattie, Goldsmith, Wordsworth, Shelley, and—if we admit speculative, personal letters into critical discourse—Keats. A large body of lasting criticism in the period comes from good poets. The phenomenon of the poet-critic reminds us that the criticism of the present time that will, in retrospect, be most valued and formative may very well not be academic studies, reviews in learned journals, and rarified theoretical inquiries, but the letters, fugitive essays, prefaces, interviews, and occasional manifestoes of practicing poets, novelists, and other writers—all of which will take a generation or more to sift out.

Furthermore, the critical texts—the touchstones of criticism that constantly provoke and elicit response—are the plays of Shakespeare and the poems of Milton. The effect of this cannot be underestimated. These authors are supplemented, to varying degrees throughout the century, by Chaucer, Spenser, and later Pope. A major impetus for the *Biographia Literaria* is Coleridge's appreciation and judgment of Wordsworth as poet and critic, his "dialogue" with him. In one respect English criticism develops tardily, a century or more after having produced, from Chaucer through Milton, a rich and varied body of literature. When criticism begins to flower in the later seventeenth century, its first instinct (an instinct, for better

or worse, characterizing English criticism ever since) is more empirical than theoretical. As Hugh Blair remarks in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), "All science arises from observations on practice. Practice has always gone before method and rule; but method and rule have afterwards improved and perfected practice, in every art."⁶ A "high priori road," as Pope derisively calls it in another context in the *Essay on Man*, could not be glorified when such landmarks as *Paradise Lost*, *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, and *The Faerie Queene* stood in plain and popular view.

Eighteenth-century critics tend to view evaluation and judgment as paramount. In doing so they subsume generic, structural, and linguistic criteria. Dryden, in his preface to *The State of Innocence*, approvingly notes: "Criticism, as it was first instituted by Aristotle, was meant a standard of judging well." The opening lines of Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711) imply the strongly judgmental nature of criticism, as does Johnson's definition of *critic* (a word first used in our modern sense by Shakespeare). Johnson defines "critic" as someone "skilled in the art of judging literature," who is "able to distinguish the faults and beauties of writing." As a measure of how quickly this definition had become established, we can recall that in the first half of the seventeenth century criticism generally did not imply literary criticism; however, by the 1670s and 1680s that usage was universally accepted, and by the beginning of the next century it was settled. When Johnson himself contemplates writing a "History of Criticism . . . from Aristotle to the present age," a remarkable undertaking to be projected at that time, but also a signal that he feels such a history could then, perhaps for the first time in England, be written, he thinks of the undertaking "as it relates to Judging of Authors."⁷ Judgment remains the lifeblood of the reviewer, whose existence, seemingly transient, is assured a lasting niche in every literary community. Until that apocalyptic day when a single literary theory becomes universally accepted, criticism will continue to be a diversified affair, and it will include judgments. Its current diversity is a sign of health. We are all pluralists to some degree, at least more than we often care to admit. But we

should not lose sight of the eighteenth-century understanding that, in the end, a critic always evaluates, if only by selecting what to discuss, what to make the subject of a book or article, on what to lavish time and energy.

One effect of criticism, or of repeated criticisms, far from fragmenting the experience of literature, can be to organize and unite that experience, at least to make connections, to give us a tradition or traditions. We may form a series of views that, like indices marking angles of refraction, converge until a white light illuminates our experience of the object "as it really is," or at least as it seems to be according to our best efforts at self-education and our refusal to become set in our ways. The echo here is not from Arnold and Pater alone (surprisingly close in their emphasis that criticism should try to see the object as it really is), but also from Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Johnson. *Rambler* 3 personifies Criticism as originally bearing a torch, of which it was "the particular quality immediately to shew every thing in its true form, however it might be disguised to common eyes."

Whether conceived as a single system or as a collective, pluralistic undertaking with varieties and emphases, criticism is analytic and synthetic, practical and theoretical. As a process it resembles what Coleridge says in chapter fourteen of the *Biographia Literaria* about philosophical discourse; it distinguishes in order then to create a schema or sense of coherence:

The office of philosophical *disquisition* consists in just *distinction*; while it is the privilege of the philosopher to preserve himself constantly aware, that distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical *process* of philosophy. But having done so, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually co-exist; and this is the *result* of philosophy.

For "philosophy" and its cognates substitute "criticism" and its cognates, and for "any truth" substitute "any body of literature." Then this passage describes much of our critical endeavor, the idea Frye

has in mind when he says that criticism should stand in the same relation to literature that philosophy does to wisdom.

It has become a maxim that not to have a stated method is to have one anyway—a “hidden agenda.” Yet it is also true that the theoretical statement of a method never ensures its practice, and its practice never ensures its intelligent practice. A “wayward” practice may even save us from the rigidities of method and yield insight. These are the very procedural issues that neoclassical theory wrestles with for decades, issues that romantic criticism redefines rather than solves. “It is curious, considering the brilliance of the leading scholars in the field,” Northrop Frye told the Modern Language Association in 1984, “how much critical theory today has relapsed into a confused and claustrophobic battle of methodologies, where, as in Fortinbras’ campaign in *Hamlet*, the ground fought over is hardly big enough to hold the contending armies.”⁸ The chapters that follow attempt to enlarge the account of several “essentially contested concepts,” and of individual critics who define, recast, and deal with them. With sympathy we can see these critics as individuals caught up in a drama that takes for its subject the expression—in language—of world, culture, and self, of experience, imagination, and action.

Critical studies have as their immediate object other books and publications, many of them written centuries ago, when problems and situations existed for literature and for humanity that do not exist today. In turn, those books, essays, and reviews discuss other poems, books, and essays whose sources may be as varied as “life,” “nature,” the “fantastic,” or yet again other books. An easy way out of this maze would be to argue that all books are ultimately written about other books, that texts are self-enclosed worlds. There is a certain elegance and truth to this proposition. So far as we understand the universe and our own natures, and so far as we both create and understand with words, our understanding and verbal creativity are found in our texts. “Burn but his books,” says Caliban of Prospero, and he will become a weak, powerless victim. But Hilaire Belloc, writing in *The Silence of the Sea*, supplies the depressing