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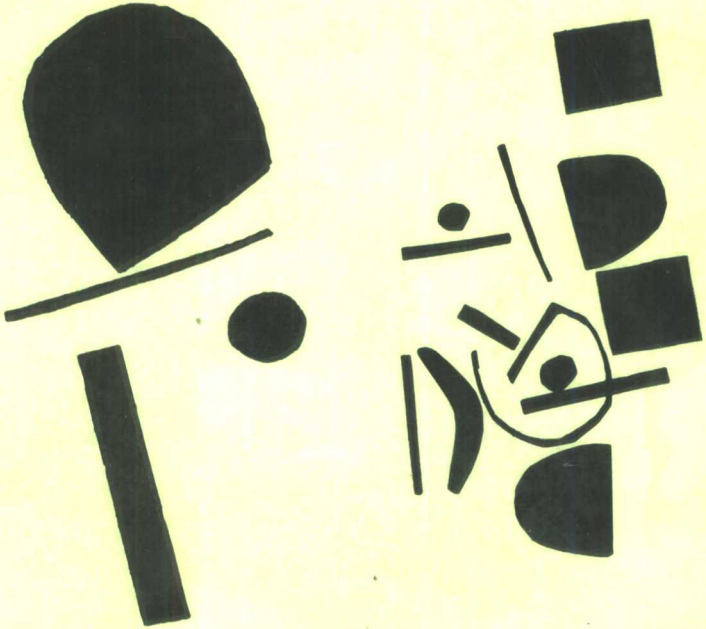

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CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

EDWARD ARNOLD

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Preface

OUR aim in collecting together the essays in this volume is a double one: to look at the state and function of criticism at the present time, and to offer an exploration of the various methods of critical procedure that are now prevalent. To that end we have drawn together some of the leading contemporary English and American critics (and they in turn have drawn into the discussion the important European critics) who might give the reader—whether he be the specialized student or the general reader—some sense of the lively issues in the current ferment of literary criticism on both sides of the Atlantic. But its purpose goes further, for the volume also aspires to be an argument and a questioning—about where criticism has come to, where it is leading, and what kinds of growth and difficulty lie before it. For criticism in the modern world has reached a point of considerable sophistication. Perhaps many will feel—like the American critic who complained a few years back that American criticism had become 'subtle to the point of secrecy'—that this sophistication, these days not only American, is not all for the best. There is, after all, an old ideal that criticism should be socially judicious—which is to say that it should be part of the public activity of a society, maintaining a general climate of discrimination, and helping the general reader to read better and to find his way through the best of literature with more profit and illumination. It has to be confessed that in many ways criticism today has passed beyond being the intelligent debate of society about its literature. Having acquired, in the academy, the privilege of a specialist audience, it has tended to grow more arcane and difficult, reaching its highest point of development not in the magazines but, as Graham Hough observes, in the headily advanced atmosphere of the graduate school. That sort of development might well have led to one of those ages of criticism—there have been some in the past, for instance with the coming of Romanticism to Europe—when the growth of critical theory and philosophy stirred all sorts of new energies in the creative arts. But even that hardly seems the case now; the professionalism of criticism today is a good deal more academic than literary; the common writer as well as the common reader often seem to lie outside its purlieus.

To some extent, though, the sense of increased difficulty derives from the fact that criticism has been transformed by new tendencies and approaches, so that the scene is much more confusing and less well defined than it was a few years ago. Some reasons for this ferment are discussed in these essays; but undoubtedly one feature of it is a growing concern with critical theory. The very procedures and the very nature of criticism have come under increasing analysis. At the same time, large new areas of approach have been drawn into its dialogues and discussion, not exactly dislodging that concern with practical reading and study of text which marked much New Critical practice, but shifting emphasis and direction. Whether this is to the good or bad is at issue: in different ways various essays here—especially Malcolm Bradbury's, Graham Hough's and W. K. Wimsatt's at the beginning of the volume and Ian Gregor's salutary piece at the end—raise the problem. Nonetheless, as Graham Hough points out, we live in a time of intellectual ferment when many of our received ideas about civilization, culture and literature are in question, and that is bound to make criticism engrossed with itself. This has led to an increasing tendency towards literary theory—to speculation about its own means and tactics, and speculation about the nature and meaning of literature. It is indeed possible for it to become *too* self-engrossed, so that criticism's own methods become criticism's paramount concern, and the literature it exists to discuss comes to seem secondary or distant. The fact remains that some speculation about the nature of criticism is inevitable; it has always existed, and each age tends to have to undertake the task again. Still, most of the critics in this volume would probably take it as axiomatic that no criticism is relevant or interesting which does not bear in mind the constant moving back and forth between text and the body of hypotheses that the practised critic can bring to it, just as they would recognize that sensibility and responsiveness are quite as significant as theory for adequate critical reading. But since criticism thrives by comparison, by extension of reference, by the capacity for elucidation, a degree of broad speculation is an inevitable part of its task.

The purpose of this book is to provide an up-to-date exploration of the current dialogue. The reader will find that certain essential themes recur from essay to essay, and some of them, certainly, are the themes that seem most at issue wherever one looks in criticism today. For instance, it was an old piety of the New Criticism that to understand the nature of a literary work one had to understand that its character

was that of a *verbal* creation. However much it might have resembled life, it was a construct in words, a fiction, controlled and managed through linguistic and rhetorical features. But where New Criticism tended to be interested in the consequences of that awareness in terms of the inner structure of works of literature, emphasizing 'tension', 'irony' and 'paradox' as the essential constituents of literary works, and stressing the conscious treatment of the materials involved in the creative process, recent criticism has started to press further. It has, for instance, gone increasingly into language study, looking at the structural and social nature of language itself. Several of the essays that follow—notably Graham Hough's, W. K. Wimsatt's, and the lively, challenging piece by Roger Fowler—pursue various dimensions of the way criticism can go, perhaps *has* logically to go, in view of that insight. In one direction, this can take us into a new kind of formalism—and here the essays by John Fletcher and Allan Rodway raise some of the possibilities—where we seek to comprehend the nature of literary structures as typologies, recurrent structures to be illuminated by classification and comparison. In another direction, it can take us towards relating both the individual experience in individual works and the more general 'types' of literature to the orders and meanings of society, so inviting us to comprehend the 'cultural' existence of literature: this is the topic on which Richard Hoggart writes.

In the view of the editors, these lines of enquiry do suggest some of the most lively issues in criticism today. It is perhaps worth adding that they do seriously impinge on the question of what meaning and purpose we assume literature to have in a time of considerable social change; and in this sense they relate to many of the general intellectual urgencies of the day. The problems of the relationship between the 'fictive' and the world of society and history obviously engross many writers now, as they do many critics; and perhaps this volume might help to suggest why they do.

Our contributors, incidentally, include several who are associated with particular approaches to literature. We have sought to be eclectic and have invited them to explore the lineage and character of such particular approaches and to express their own convictions. So, in the following pages, we may see a variety of approaches, some of which may be viewed as complementary to others, some which may be viewed as exclusive. W. K. Wimsatt considers the approach through the text, Allan Rodway that through literary typologies like novel and

poem, lyric and epic, John Fletcher that through broader forms of comparison derived from taking an international view, and Norman Holland, Richard Hoggart and Roger Fowler approaches illuminated by insights derived from psychology, cultural and language studies. We can record these in a plural way, as providing a composite view of the literary text; or in a competitive way, as offering different and contending approaches. Our editorial aim is not to suggest one or the other view, but rather to hope that the essays, taken together, will suggest the variety of opinion active today in the discussion of literature, as well as demonstrating some of the difficulties and uncertainties besetting the modern critic.

MALCOLM BRADBURY
February 1970 DAVID PALMER

Bibliographical Note

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Note

This list is concerned with general works on or overall surveys of criticism—histories of critical thought; comparative or synthetic studies of modern criticism; works which raise essential problems of critical approach, method or theory; and useful anthologies of critical essays. Critical works of a more specific kind are referred to in the *Notes* to later articles in this volume (and in the text of this and other essays).

Histories of Criticism. The best and most convenient one-volume study is W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957); the introduction contains a very useful bibliographical listing of other histories. There are important larger works—J. W. H. Atkins's *English Literary Criticism* (3 volumes, Cambridge and London, 1943–51) and René Wellek's excellent *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950* (4 volumes, New Haven and London, 1955–66). The most useful historical anthology is Walter Jackson Bate, *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York, 1952); its admirable editorial commentary has been published separately as Walter Jackson Bate, *Prefaces to Criticism* (New York, 1959). M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953) is an excellent account of the transition from neoclassic to Romantic criticism. George Watson's *The Literary Critics* (1962) is a good brief survey of English criticism.

Modern Criticism: Comparative Studies. The three most useful surveys are Austin Warren and René Wellek, *The Theory of Literature* (New York and London, 1949); David Daiches, *Critical Approaches to Literature* (New York and London, 1956), and Stanley Edgar Hyman, *The Armed Vision* (New York, 1948). Also see W. L. Guerin, E. G. Labor, L. Morgan and J. Willingham, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (New York, 1966). Various modern critics have sought to offer an overall critical perspective: notable works are T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1953); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957); I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924); Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941; revised edition, New York, 1957); R. S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto, 1953); John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (New York, 1938), and W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1954).

Modern Criticism: General Collections of Essays. Among the best of these are: *Critiques and Essays in Criticism: 1920–1948* edited by Robert Wooster Stallman (New York, 1949); *Literary Opinion in America* edited by Morton D. Zabel (New York, 1951); *Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment* edited by Mark Schorer *et al.* (New York, 1948); *The Critical Performance* edited by Stanley Edgar Hyman (New York, 1956), and *The Modern Critical Spectrum* edited by Gerald and Nancy Goldberg (New York, 1962).

More particular tendencies are represented in *The Importance of Scrutiny* edited by Eric Bentley (New York, 1948); *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*

I

Introduction: The State of Criticism Today

MALCOLM BRADBURY

I

IN the last few years, the activity of literary criticism, the general character of its dialogue and debate, has changed a good deal. The change has taken place, in different ways, in England, in the United States, and in Europe; and one striking feature of it is, indeed, the growing degree of interpenetration of the different national traditions. Now criticism has, of course, been one of the growth-industries of the twentieth century. For this critical boom there may be any amount of reasons—a rising intellectual population, an uncertainty about the received traditions in literature, an intense ferment within the literary arts themselves. We could take this critical expansion as a signal that literature has a more striking and significant place amongst us than it had in the past—though, equally, we can take the proliferation of interpretation as a sign that for many readers it now has a *less* important one. Whatever the significance (and the latter is more likely than the former), *something* has happened since the early years of the century, when Henry James was pleading for a criticism along other than infantile lines, when Ford Madox Ford was complaining of the total absence of the critical attitude, and when it was possible for a professor of English, Walter Raleigh, to say, in 1906, 'I begin to hate criticism. Nothing can come of it.'

'Time is ripe for the forging of a weapon of criticism, and for the emphatic assertion of literary standards,' wrote Harold Monro in the first number of his lively editorship of the *Poetry Review* in January 1912; and elsewhere in the same issue Arthur K. Sabin complained that criticism had achieved 'no consistent method by which the true artist

edited by R. S. Crane (Chicago, 1952); also, more recently, in *The Critical Moment*, introduction by Stephen Spender (1968), and *The Disciplines of Criticism: Essays in Literary Theory, Interpretation and History* edited by Peter Demetz *et al.* (New Haven, 1968).

can be distinguished from the false with any reliability' and that 'no standard of taste has yet proved sufficiently comprehensive to assay correctly the merit of a new poet and relegate him, as the critics still futilely attempt to do, to a fitting rank and station among his peers.' But over these years criticism was growing busy again, as a necessary aspect of the literary revolution that was transforming aesthetics, poetics and taste and establishing the existence of a remarkable new literary generation, one that still dominates the literature of our century. *The Egoist* began to print not only criticism but *discussion* of criticism by Eliot and Pound; *The Athenaeum*, in its final burst of glory under John Middleton Murry, reverted to its nineteenth-century practice and committed itself to a high level of serious reviewing, printing a succession of important articles and book reviews on literature by writers like Eliot, Murry, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley. By the nineteen twenties a number of reviews with a considerable literary-critical content emerged (*The Criterion* and *The Calendar of Modern Letters* in England; the revived *Dial* and the *Hound and Horn* in the United States, for example), and gradually a new type of periodical devoted entirely to criticism—for instance, *Scrutiny*, beginning in 1932—started to emerge. Today any devotee of bookshops will know that there is probably more new criticism appearing than new creative writing; and criticism has become a discipline, like sociology or biology, the skills and techniques of which are in perpetual transmission through the classrooms of schools and universities.

T. S. Eliot once remarked, in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, that 'the development of criticism is a symptom of the development, or change, of poetry; and the development of poetry is itself a symptom of social change. The important moment for the appearance of criticism seems to be the time when poetry ceases to be the expression of the mind of a whole people.' The implication here is that criticism acquires a special importance when the arts need to be explained and mediated, rather than being taken 'directly' by the public; and that criticism is also closely related to the coming of a new selfconsciousness or an aesthetic revisionism in the arts. And in fact modern criticism *is* closely related, in its origins and spirit, to the literary ferments of the beginning of the century, and the kind of self-conscious analytic environment in which they were made; just as its persistence is—though perhaps a little less closely—related to the climate of aesthetic uncertainty and plurality that has affected all of

subsequent modern writing. Indeed, the really important figures in the early stages of modern criticism are, precisely, the new writers themselves—Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, and Henry James. And to their eyes a central function of criticism was to create the enabling environment for those arts, to produce the taste by which they might be understood or, indeed, actually created. To Ezra Pound, for example, criticism had a specific use in stimulating and also changing the poetic environment, and it was hence a short-term and conditioned activity: criticism, he said, 'shd. consume itself and disappear.' It has not, of course: far from it. By the nineteen twenties the new poetics and the new aesthetics were becoming matters of general lore and systematic intellectual enquiry. There was a great coming of the critics, and over this and the next decade emerged a literary critical generation almost as powerful as the literary generation just prior, producing their classic texts in their turn—I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929); William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930); Kenneth Burke's *Counter-Statement* (1931); F. R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932); Allen Tate's *Reactionary Essays* (1936); Yvor Winters's *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937); and John Crowe Ransom's *The World's Body* (1938), for example. Critics like these were, on the one hand, responsible for a vast new attentiveness to works of literature as something to be read, closely, intensively, responsively, and studiously (Cleanth Brooks's and Robert Penn Warren's contribution, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), perhaps the most influential book of all, was specifically a *classroom* text), and for a new, applied practicality in criticism. On the other hand, they were also responsible for creating, implicitly or explicitly, a body of critical assumptions about the nature of literary language and literary energy which was in fact fairly precisely derived from the modernist or neosymbolist movement in literature at the beginning of the century; the intellectual threads reach back to Eliot, Pound, James and others—and beyond them to *their* sources in T. E. Hulme, Bergson, Remy de Gourmont and French symbolist aesthetics. In the former activity, they undoubtedly democratized criticism, which became an inalienable right of all men; it was not good taste but attentive effort that lay behind critical reading and responsiveness. In the latter, they reached into a line of complex aesthetic theory that encouraged certain sorts of evaluative preferences (for instance, for complex, witty, ironic poetry) and a certain theory of the nature of literary language, which was markedly distinguished

from all other language by its internal, neosymbolist, self-sustaining coherence. And overall they made criticism both an educational activity *and* a dedication, a commitment to distinct and discrete literary values, even to a literary *assessment* of the culture as a whole.

The result of this situation was a period of remarkably intensive critical activity and enquiry, running along two main lines. One of these was the elucidation of literary texts themselves, which were subjected, in classrooms and in print, to singularly intensive analysis, to the profoundest scouring and searching out, so that no word, set down on paper with whatever anguish or gay abandon, went unanalysed, no symbol went unturned. The other was an intensive analysis of criticism itself, a questioning of its methods and procedures, a rationalization of all readerly responses. Though it became fairly obvious early on that there was no sense in which the methods of literary criticism could be in any final way scientific ones, producing precise and agreed-upon results, the idea that criticism could become vastly more exact, and produce certain irrefutable hypotheses about the nature or structure of a text or more broadly about the nature and structure of literature itself, tended to develop. There were certain features common to all literary language; and literature was essentially a structure *in* language, not mirroring life but creating it through the controls of technique. If literature did not quite exist in a timeless vacuum, then it was assumed, usually, to exist in a discrete verbal world. And though that world made reference to life, the prime requirement on the artist, the prime perfection of his art, was his aesthetic control, his craft or his technique. In that respect this criticism—the broad label for it is the 'New Criticism'—was formalistic. But at the same time it was humanistic and generous, in that it regarded the individual competence of the writer, his designing and controlling hand, his achievement finally as the exemplary artist, as the true moral centre of literary art, and as a power in society. (I stress this aspect because part of the current change in criticism is, I think, an inclination to turn away from technique and to be interested in the broader fundings of myths and themes which are 'social', impersonal, unsigned.)[1] It was felt that there could be a

[1] A particular instance of my point here would be the work of French 'structuralist' critics like Roland Barthes, or certain forms of mythocentric criticism in America. However, one might note than the tendency has obviously struck in creative writing as well—in the happening, in poetry and jazz, and so on. Here art is conceived of as a manifestation much more than as a creation;

'common pursuit of true judgment', to draw on Eliot's classic phrases that there were certain hypotheses about a particular literary text, or about the nature of literature generally, which could acquire a kind of proven status; that force and power in literature could be demonstrated; that not only in elucidation but in valuation a certain core of essential points of worth, a certain number of 'touchstones', could be established. (It seems evident that many critics have now come to feel that many of the apparent statements of 'fact' on which agreement seemed to have been reached were really concealed statements of value; this is perfectly true, though not invalidating, since after all it is presumably essential that critics *should* assume that literature does, by being literature, embody for themselves and others a certain body of essential values.) In short, then, the New Criticism contained a search for precision which was also a search for an essential body of standards in literature that came from its inherent nature *as* literature. It pursued an idea of relevance and exactness, seeking to contain its discussion and dialogue within something like an agreed framework, by concentrating on the single text and then on purely literary standards. In trying to define the appropriate aspects of its activity, it increasingly pointed to one primary object of critical attention—not the critic's own appreciative sensibility; not the writer's biography or psychological background; not his intellectual, social or historical context; not the creative process or the readerly response; but the one central, ascertainable object that critics could discuss in common and constantly refer to: the text, the 'words on the page'. Here was the irreducible literary minimum; here was that which let us regard criticism as a debate focussed round a common centre and moving towards a single meaning; here was that which might encapsulate both elucidation and evaluation, those twin properties long linked with critical activity; here was that which enabled us to think of literary criticism as educational, since by illuminating a text we could illuminate our own response to life and value, could acquire sympathy, responsiveness, and regard.

Today, of course, the New Criticism is not new, and it is with the change beyond it that I am here concerned. Nonetheless, I suppose that many critics, perhaps most, today would hold still that the New Criticism had a convincing logic behind it, and perhaps even that it

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it is, as I have argued in another place, rather a 'culture of politics' than a 'politics of culture'.

has been the central mode of twentieth-century criticism. It properly shifted us away from, on the one hand, those responses to literature which assume that literature holds the mirror up to nature, that there is direct equivalence between the thing written and the life in the world it imitates; anyone who reads at all seriously in modern literature knows about the fictiveness of all our fictions. It has shifted us, on the other, away from those responses that devote the main part of critical sympathy to particular charismatic personalities (John Keats, Jane Austen, Henry James) whose lure lies in their very lives rather than in their written achievement. In passing beyond certain forms of generalized appreciation, and in transforming the once common view that literary study could take the form only of historical, textual or philological scholarship, the New Criticism has pressed us towards an understanding of the internal, holistic momentum of a work of literature, and directed us to the one secure object of literary study we have (this poem, this novel, this play), with a logic that we cannot evade.[2] It has been a rich criticism, especially with texts having the concrete internal intensity, the tension and paradox, the high linguistic pressure that it saw as essential characteristics of literature. (Its best objects of study were the lyric poem and the short story.) And, as I have said, in its concern with technique—what Mark Schorer called 'technique as

[2] What I am describing here is of course the so-called 'ontological' approach to literature. Its assumptions are that the poem or fiction can be judged from within itself; that adequate reading will reveal the constituents necessary for understanding and interpreting the work because it is self-supporting and self-extant, unified because of its coherence as language; and that the only potential directions of reference outside the text are really (a) to life, by judging the poem as a distillation of experience, (b) to other poems, by judging it comparatively and (c) to an acquired literary-historical sense derived from the progression of forms and language. But in fact this 'intrinsic' or 'ontological' approach is one which various New Critics have formulated in different, and more or less 'purist', ways. For one important version, see John Crowe Ransom, 'Poetry: A Note on Ontology' (1934), reprinted in R. W. Stallman, *Critiques and Essays in Criticism: 1920–1948* (New York, 1949). A further elaboration of this view, pointing to the logical dangers of going beyond the text for information extraneous to satisfactory analysis, is to be found in W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy' and 'The Affective Fallacy', both in W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1954). It should be added that they do not deny the uses, but only the *incautious* or illogical uses, of such information. An up-to-date discussion of the ontological view of criticism and indeed of its potential breadth is to be found in W. K. Wimsatt's essay in this collection.