LITERARY CRITICISM

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

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A Practical Guide for Students

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Preface

In designing this book for students of literature, our purposes are interrelated and threefold: first and foremost, to develop a sound appreciation of literature generally; secondly, to help students improve their performance in examinations and coursework, particularly those which present unseen passages for critical commentary; lastly, to provide an introduction to the broader spectrum of literary studies in higher education.

At its best, the process of literary criticism is one of continuing evolution and careful reappraisal of existing principles. So, while we fully recognize within these pages that the basic skills which you are required to develop actually derive from what has now become a traditional approach to criticism, our aim is also to help you to a more distinctive and satisfying achievement by giving you some awareness of the assumptions which underlie what you are doing and the new approaches to literature which have proliferated in recent years. These approaches have gained wider and wider currency and, surprising though it may seem, it could well be that such otherwise formidable 'isms' as post-structuralism, feminism, and their like, are already implicitly reflected in your own reading responses and group discussions. Our book should help to clarify and extend your thinking about the works you read.

The book begins with an approachable and wide-ranging guide to theory, followed by an extensive section of useful practical hints on answering examination questions. Since there is no confidence to be gained from those who do not, or cannot, practise what they preach, the middle section of the book is taken up with our analyses of literary examples, illustrative of those basic skills and issues discussed in the first part. We have taken the view that all writing is literature, involving the orchestration of language to reveal ideas, and that literary criticism can be profitably exercised on all types of text. So you will find examples on a broad range of subjects drawn not only from poetry, fictional prose and drama, but also from historical writing, the essay and journals. In the interests of comprehensiveness, these range from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Exercises in unseen literary

appreciation sometimes provide authors' names and titles of works from which the passages are taken, but we have decided to list our sources separately at the back of the book for you to consult when you choose. This is because the revealing of the writer's name and work seems to us a mixed blessing. Any information, no matter how limited, rightly encourages the notion that books do not somehow drop from the skies. On the other hand, if the information means something to you, you could be tempted beyond the immediate task in hand. Equally, if it means nothing, you could well be unsettled in an environment which calls upon all the coolness you can muster. Ideas should not be imposed as a result of any assumptions you might have about the author or work named, but generated from the passage in front of you.

Finally, in the closing part of the book we have sought to anticipate remaining uncertainties by offering answers to the questions that have most frequently arisen in the course of our discussions with large numbers of students. We know that students are understandably irritated by what they consider to be irrelevancies; that in the real world it is examination success which is all-important. Without wishing to encourage any kind of philistinism, we have sympathetically taken this to heart. In complementing the work of teachers and lecturers, we wish to equip our readers with the skills needed to respond to, and write perceptively about, the examples which they will confront in class and examination. These skills, we believe, will also help students to tackle their set texts, develop their wider reading, and advance their love of literature.

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Part I
Theory and Practice of Criticism

(i) Propositions

The way in which people write brings its own assumptions and implications, and this is as true of the book you are reading as it is of any other. In our presentation of examples in Part II, we are assuming the validity of a certain type of criticism: that of a practical, or technical, kind capable of coming up with substantial objective observations even though each passage is divorced from its contexts. These include the rest of the work, the other works of the author and of his or her contemporaries, and that seemingly limitless field which we can both confine and define under the phrase 'the social and historical milieu'. Practical criticism of this kind remains the foundation of reading, and your development of the techniques it involves will help you in all areas of your literary studies. But it would be short-sighted not to take into account the new approaches to reading a text which have multiplied in recent years. These are in the process of questioning and qualifying the ideas which inform practical criticism, both as a challenge to, and development of, the basic reading process. In section (iii) of this part we introduce you to the most important of these new methods.

Offering passages in isolation is artificial. All literature has its context; but when we pause to consider just where we might fix the limits of time and place we come to find, no matter how comprehensive we strive to be, that boundaries are incapable of being determined. How much time, for example, would we need to devote to an investigation of the social and political world of Shakespeare's history plays to feel confident that we had the knowledge necessary for a definitive interpretation? It is important for you to preserve a careful balance between demonstrating the practical literary skills you have acquired on the details of set passages or texts and indicating your ability to discuss such wider matters as are prompted by them. It is all too easy to make over-confident generalizations for which neither your reading nor writing can provide a basis, yet it might be some comfort for you to know that even academics are not always blameless in this respect. It has often been the case that we have read and heard (and, in our weaker

moments, been tempted into ourselves) casual remarks which would embarrass, say, the more scholarly social or economic historian. Perhaps the experienced critic is capable of the occasional broad observation, but you must be wary of those catch-all definitions which begin 'In the Renaissance . . .' or 'The nineteenth century was a time of . . .'. On the other hand, do try on the well-judged occasion to see the 'wood' from your exploration of the 'trees' which compose it.

(ii) Analysis and evaluation

Theory is implicit in any practice. Any syllabus involves choice, and selection is inevitably based upon principles, whether acknowledged or not. It is generally agreed that a knowledge of theory is essential to a full understanding of what we are doing when we engage with literature at any level. Practical criticism itself reflects theoretical assumptions, as a glance at its history shows. A useful point of origin to focus upon occurred in the 1920s when Professor I. A. Richards presented his Cambridge students with unattributed poems for their appraisal. He was shocked by what he considered to be the arbitrariness, or lawlessness, of their responses, contradicting the established reputations of the writers he had chosen. Reading literature had by then achieved the status of a discipline worthy of being studied at university, and there was a need to advance beyond vague, impressionistic responses and evolve fixed standards by which students' reactions could be judged.

Notice that the proponents of this new rigour believed that evaluations could indeed be made and justified. These were to be realized through intense scrutiny of individual texts, or passages from texts, paying attention to the categories students are still expected to examine in literary appreciation papers and assignments. This certainly testifies to the historical versatility of practical criticism, the analytical format of which embodies the desire to be scientific. But exercises in practical criticism often call for a response to questions such as 'how effectively does the passage . . .?' which are judicial and evaluative, although meant to derive from the application of objective criteria to the task in hand. The language of literary criticism often confuses description with evaluation and, when pressed to give reasons for our conclusions of approval or disapproval, we are in danger of marshalling apparently impartial evidence which in fact turns out to be judicial. Our conclusions risk being embedded in the evidence, leading at its worst to tautologies which amount to saying that something is effective because it is effective. This is to argue that a war poem is moving simply because war is an emotive subject, or that a sonnet is successful because it contains fourteen lines.

Students themselves sense the inevitability of judgement, with all its

problems, in their often irritated defences such as 'it's all subjective anyway', or 'that's just what you [the teacher or lecturer] say'. Yet if your criticism plays safe, and confines itself to purely descriptive observation – saying, for example, that the blank verse in front of you consists of unrhymed lines each of ten syllables – it gets you nowhere in meaningful involvement with the literary experience.

The existence of objective criteria from which sound evaluations can be evolved has been called into question by much modern critical thought. In an article in *The Times Literary Supplement* back in February 1980, Professor John Carey of Oxford University began with the observation that 'the dislodgement of "evaluation" has been effected with remarkably little fuss'. However, this view has not been universally accepted, and we need to trace the path by which judgements are reached.

Consensus of opinion is ultimately what carries the day. This is likely to be affected by all sorts of influences: that of a teacher or lecturer over his or her students, or that of anything you read to help your studies (including the book you're reading now!). An enlightened and sensible attitude is to appreciate that it is out of group discussion, guided by the greater experience of the teacher or lecturer, that reasonable conclusions are gained. For, really, the only road to competence in this scheme of practice, the only road to maturity (a favourite word of the senior figures in practical literary criticism) is through continued exercise. This itself suggests that the workings of literary criticism cannot be reduced to some clinical skills which are easily and quickly acquired. The consensus we speak of is influenced by a whole range of ideological, social, and historical factors which shape the situation in which the appreciation is taking place. But, although we cannot determine the exact nature or boundary of these complexities, this does not mean that we should not be aware of their presence. At the very least, for example, we can sense that Shakespeare will be read differently in different geographic, historical, political and class surroundings. Although all students are, of course, not identical, the ideal of examination work is to elicit an intelligent uniformity of response. Naturally, if this were to happen we would all get the same marks. Ability will always vary, but it is ability which most searchingly applies critical skills which will be most amply rewarded.

This means that external considerations which influence reader response must be recognized but kept in check. These include the pace of our reading, our mood at the time, and the associations words have for us beyond the use made of them in the text. The discipline needed is to try to focus upon the part that language plays within the work in hand. By this means a canon of supposed literary excellence has accumulated through thousands of years of classical and modern literary production. The qualities enshrined in this literature are thought to

testify to the existence of norms to which we all – reader, critic and artist – subscribe. So a question on *Macbeth* which asks 'How successfully does Shakespeare dramatize the conflict between good and evil?' takes it for granted that there are absolutes of 'good' and 'evil' which it is likely that Shakespeare has in some measure effectively expressed in his tragedy.

Faith in the existence of abiding standards has been questioned by a number of different critical approaches, some of which we touch on in section (iii). In broad terms this could be seen to be linked to the political condition of the world we live in, where individual liberty, or licence, is valued over and above authoritarian constraints, be they ever so enlightened. Some literary/critical versions of this state of affairs do take the reader's response into account. Each reading of the text is considered to be worth attending to as an integral part of critical engagement. In its more radical manifestations, this leads to the idea that literary categories, and the qualities which are thought to derive from them, are impositions upon material which inhibit the reading process. If, then, we go a step further and take individual reactions as the sole guide to literary judgement, we might find the pulp prose of the daily tabloid preferred to the works of Shakespeare.

(iii) Theories

The essential ingredient for excellence in practical criticism has been generally thought to be complexity. The classic treatise in this case was and remains William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, first published in 1930. He dismantles and reassembles texts as if they were watches in order to see what makes them tick. From his example we are meant to learn the skills of literary analysis. But the analogy breaks down because the detailed complexity of literature, with all its social and historical ramifications, will not yield to the circumscribed, mechanical dimensions of a wrist-watch. In the final analysis literary criticism cannot be reduced to scientific practice upon finite material, no matter how much the terms of its discourse might betray a yearning to claim that kind of status. Our experience of students' queries about set texts, particularly Shakespeare, is instructive here. Their questions sometimes presuppose an 'either/or' solution to the problem they face (e.g. 'Is Macbeth foredoomed or does he have free will?'). But life admits of no easy answers, nor does Shakespeare. Indeed, doubtless it is because Shakespeare and other major writers are so complex that a desire for secure guidelines is revealed in this type of question. It is important to realize that honest doubts, reached after a thorough and responsible inquiry, are by no means a confession of inadequacy. On the contrary, the seeing of all sides to all questions is likely to lead to genuine uncertainties, which it would be unfortunate to resolve through crude conclusions.

Here we face the problem of the relationship between literature and life. In the eighteenth century, that great and influential critic Dr Johnson affirmed that Shakespeare held a 'mirror up to nature'. The concept is not as simple as it sounds, for it assumes that the reflection and the object are the same. Still, despite the challenges of much contemporary theory against such a common-sense view, the yardstick of quality which implicitly underpins the kind of literary experience to which most of us own, and which informs the practice you are engaged in, is one that sees the words on the page as reflecting the human condition beyond it – a reading which, in effect, emphasizes 'what' is said over 'how' it is said. This is conspicuously evident in the popular reading of novels, where the stylistic and rhetorical manner of presentation is much less readily apparent than it is in poetry or verse drama. Yet 'how' things are said, the manner, inevitably conditions 'what' is being said, the content, in all writing. The familiar concept of a 'good read', however, would seek to do away with the effort of analysis; for the sentiment that analysis is not only unnecessary, but actually harms the reading process, is commonly held. Historically, this has led to chronic disagreements between critical and creative practitioners. The poet Wordsworth was not alone when he protested that we 'murder to dissect', and we often encounter students who have heartfelt complaints about the ruinous effects of pulling things to pieces. We are sympathetic, yet retain a faith in the enhancing process of literary criticism. As with so many things, added pleasure is only won through effort, and often we all prefer an easy time. It is certainly our hope that you do not see the tasks before you as merely onerous, but as actually deepening the pleasure of reading.

The consequence of the common-sense view is that literature is generally felt to be effective if it appears to be a distinctive reflection, based upon cautious consideration of its stylistic procedures, of the widest range of what is known, or thought, to be the complex of real-life experience. These days some critics call all this in doubt. They see language as possessing an infinite play of resonances where no meaning can be fixed or, as they say, grounded. That literature imitates life is still a widely-held view. But what if, as Oscar Wilde half playfully, half profoundly, supposed a century ago now, it is life which imitates literature – if, say, in dwelling bitterly upon the supposed infidelity of girlfriend or boyfriend, it is your own reading of love poetry which helps to form your 'real life' reflections, rather than the other way round? For the more experienced in reading you become, the more the dividing lines between literature and life dissolve; and although the study of literature is not intended to turn you into psychotics, with no grasp upon reality whatever, it surely encourages you to see the novel, the poem, drama, essay, in meaningful cross-fertilization with your experience of life.

But what if we go further than Wilde and consider the idea that life itself is a rhetorical construct made up of infinite possibilities of meanings? One thing you would notice in the notoriously difficult language of contemporary theory is the frequent use of words in quotation marks to signal a meaning different from the norm. Here you will see that we have employed the word 'meaning', whereas some modern theorists would maintain that no final meaning is possible – hence the difficulties of understanding them. This kind of theorist is obliged to use language to which the world attaches meaning and stability, while at the same time denying that language can indeed reveal them. The term used for all the complicated manifestations of this type of thinking is itself quite straightforward – deconstruction – and although we have no wish to burden you unnecessarily with new approaches, we are aware that something of these unsettling developments – purposely set against the humane processes of the type of criticism which largely informs what you are learning – has by now influenced the whole area of reading experience, be it ever so obliquely. To have been introduced to these issues, together with the other critical strategies we shall touch on in this section, will certainly help those of you who go on to, or already attend, further education institutions. From the broadest historical and cultural survey of the writings of the Western world, the deconstructive critic sees language deployed on the assumption that it denotes the world beyond. It is this assumption which he or she seeks to challenge. Language then takes on the form (if that is the right word) of a kind of black hole, with no world beyond to reach. Whether that world and its events really exist is a question that is compromised from the start by the very language in which it is asked. So it is that all experience is 'text', or textualized. Conceive of this alongside the idea of an infinite play of meaning, and you begin to see how bewildering it all becomes.

This recent critical development began with a distrust of what was seen as the mere exercise of sensibility on the literary text. Theorists searched for a new cohesion. Impressed by practitioners in another field, anthropology, who had deduced patterns of signs in the study of primitive cultures to which particulars might be referred and by which they might be explained, they looked to the forms of linguistic science as a means of finding and imposing an order upon language. They sought an underlying pattern, or structure, to which all expression could be related and by which it could be clarified. This became known as structuralism, which even made popular news a few years back when literary critics in the humane tradition took up arms against its supporters.

It was not only traditionalists who challenged the structuralist assumptions. The deconstructionists (some of whom were themselves reformed structuralists) objected to awarding the idea of 'structure'

itself a specially privileged place outside the shifts and slides of language, when everything should be cast into the melting pot. All language, they declared, is subject to the play of *'différence'* – a French word that cannot be precisely translated into English but which suggests that all words are realized merely by their difference from all others. Consciously using the pun *'différence/différance'*, all attempts to fix meaning, in the relentless succession of past, present and future, are forever deferred – *'différance'* a coinage from the verb *différer* where it means 'to defer'. Thus it is that the term 'misreading' has been coined for the reading of texts, to emphasize the point that all readings are necessarily incomplete and therefore never established. The whole activity of reading has been likened to games play, even erotic pleasure, which does away with the notion that any settled values can be derived from, or imposed upon, the written word. While traditional critics would themselves insist on pleasure in the practice of analysis, you can see that theirs, deriving from the belief that form and content are open to secure scrutiny, is of a radically different nature.

What you will appreciate is that literary practice and the theory it entails do not stand still. Practical criticism, however, which has sustained its momentum for sixty years, continues to flourish alongside shorter-lived approaches. Structuralism has been largely overtaken by post-structuralism, which in its turn – notwithstanding how final it has seemed to be – is losing ground in favour of new historicism, or new pragmatism, which seeks to regain stability by siting the text as a product of race, milieu and moment. These are examined with a view to the needs of a new generation of readers. This movement reflects a growing dissatisfaction with the way in which deconstruction denies any affirmation whatsoever. If all language involves constant deferral of meaning, then all words enter a morass not so much of *différance*, but of indifference. This, it is argued, is simply not true to experience.

Even as deconstruction was gaining influence, other critical ideas were being formulated which locate language firmly within social context. Of these, perhaps feminism has been the most significant. Feminists see language as a male property created by a society which has been traditionally male-dominated. Language has therefore been concerned with male qualities and achievements, either reducing the female world to marginal status or viewing it through a masculine perspective. At its most forceful, feminism sees no reconciliation possible between the sexes, and then a tone of what might be called enlightened hostility informs critical feminist practice. For where the male writer, creative or critical, tries to open his writing to female values he cannot avoid assimilating women to male structures and standards, thus exercising a false chivalry which only serves to extend patriarchal control. So the feminist is forced into her own assertive reading of the text.

But just as one can trace the broad history of literary criticism, so within particular movements it is possible to chart developments. Whereas, in its early days, feminism excused the apparent inferiority of women's writing because men controlled the world and its powers of expression, as it has gained momentum and confidence the female writer has been accorded equal, if not superior, status. This revaluation can certainly be seen in revisions of course curricula and syllabuses. For, against the odds, women writers have vindicated female experience as legitimate territory. Not the least of the benefits has been to provide a radical critique of male-dominated society.

Marxist critics also resist the destabilizing endeavours of the deconstructionist. They seek to establish the ways in which a text is both product and critique of the society which has given rise to it. Within a political framework which sees progress towards a classless society as both inevitable and ideal, the Marxist critic rejects any notion that a text's excellence resides in its universality. To attribute value on those grounds is to confirm a conservative world and the moral systems which support it. Rather, he or she approves of the social and historical placing of texts as essential for demonstrating their relevance to the political movement of their times. In a propagandist sense, Marxist criticism assigns value according to the detection of effective content in the political struggle towards the classless ideal: once it has served its turn, literature can be consigned to the dustbin of history. Critics of Marxist theory argue that there is a contradiction in expecting a work of literature faithfully to represent the society from which it has emerged, and at the same time demanding that it radically take its part in moving the world onwards from the conditions it describes. At its best, however, a Marxist overview can provide a useful corrective to the all-too-familiar assumption that a text piously mirrors the universals of the human condition, which are essentially unmoved by the economic and political environment in which they operate.

This belief in universals is, at base, the liberal humanist position. By claiming that literature deals in universals – expressed in the largely timeless stylistic practices of the writer's art – the liberal humanist feels free from any taint of ideology. Marxists and other radicals counter by arguing that ideology is inescapable. Built into the very evasion of commitment is, subtly, paradoxically, a form of commitment that the Marxist finds particularly unpalatable. This takes the form of an ideological endorsement of timelessness, and therefore conservatism, or the *status quo*. Conflict, dialectic, as the essential element in the political progress of humanity, is thereby discounted.

But even Marx himself allowed that the complexities of literature might lie outside even the broadest political frame-work. Confronted by Marxist criticism, liberal humanist criticism is itself developing its own rejoinder. It argues, for example, that total emphasis upon the

political organization of society, giving rise to texts through the medium of authors, reduces the rôle of the writer. Human beings become simply (as some physiologists have argued) mechanical reflections of the world they inhabit and which inhabits them. This limitation of the artist as individual could be seen to be an unwarranted and unproven confinement of the powers of imagination. The conflict here is tantamount to a conflict of political ideology.

A very different method which has gained controversial currency is that of the application to literature of psychological theories. The literary psychologist strives not to take the text at its face value, preferring to see it as betraying meanings beneath the surface indicative of the writer's psyche and the society his or her anxieties represent. Again, this can prove a refreshing way of looking at texts, but it needs to be treated with caution. An uncritical acceptance of any of the approaches we refer to could tempt you away from the traditional critical method into easy speculation, when the discipline of concentration upon the words on the page provides the opportunity for responsible observations which seem capable of being verified. Even when measured against the conclusions of a celebrated analyst like Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalytical approach is open to the objection that its treatment of literature is impertinent. It implies that the writer did not know what he or she was writing, and licenses the all-too-knowing critic to see the text as a kind of elaborate irony at the writer's expense. In its more reasonable guises, however, it extends the possible layers of meaning beyond cautious surface evidence, and attempts to resolve intriguing discrepancies in a writer's work which forever challenge us in any engaged reading of literature.

Yet it is arguable that psychoanalytic criticism can only be conducted when we are familiar with the author's life and works. For example, one critic has related the killing of the albatross in *The Ancient Mariner* to the poet Coleridge's mother, the poem rising out of the subconscious in this particular instance to reveal deep levels of the poet's personality. Exercises in practical criticism, by definition, do not provide students with sufficient information to pursue such ideas.

One leading critic has combined the notion of the entire world as text – as explained in the earlier paragraphs on deconstruction – with psychoanalytic theories to the effect that all literature reveals not the world it appears to describe, but the writer's inmost struggles to come to terms with his or her precursors, the writers and works which have preceded his or her own efforts to say something new. This insight also gives exciting, if complicated, new life to the established method of looking at texts from the point of view of their sources and influences. Similarly, this is unsuitable for the limited field of practical criticism, and can only be profitable in literary criticism for the more experienced reader.

Biography and autobiography, though also of limited relevance to the discipline of practical criticism, do furnish an additional perspective for the interpretation of books. Of the two, biography seems to have the advantage of impartiality, whereas autobiography might reveal more of the personality at close quarters. But you will recall we maintained in the Preface that all writing is literature. From this standpoint it would be best to treat both these forms carefully. The style of presentation might well distort the truth. In our own modest ways we are all aware, perhaps, of the temptation to sacrifice a strict record of events to an entertaining account of them.

Both biography and autobiography, however, can resolve matters of fact. To take a simple example, it would be mistaken to find a writer's experiences in Venice reflected in his or her novel, if letters or journals proved the novel to have been completed, and never retouched, some period before the excursion to Italy. What all psychoanalytic or biographical approaches tend to encourage is an appreciation of the work as a discovery of the person who wrote it. In an examination context which focuses upon passages or set texts you need to concentrate upon the work rather than the author.

All these critical approaches, of course, are not often found in any pure form. The resilient reader will embrace whichever he or she at the time finds appropriate, frequently modulating from one to the other in the writing of any one piece. We shall not confuse you by elaborating on possible hybrids; but simply emphasize that if you can absorb what we have said it will serve as a useful precondition for your own reading, and make your literary work more satisfying both to yourselves and to your examiners. We urge you to think about what you are doing. A firm grasp of first principles instils confidence for most endeavours and literary criticism is no exception.

(iv) Practical advice

Naturally enough, students are always on the lookout for the secrets to examination success. We do not wish to disappoint you, but it has to be admitted that there are no secrets. Indeed, you can take heart from the fact that what we have to say here is by no means entirely novel. It will largely complement what your own teachers and lecturers advise, and afford you the security of knowing that we all - teachers, writers, examiners - think here along the same lines. There is little, if any, chance of your being misinformed. Equally, it will convince you that there is no mystique attached to the practice of good and rewarding literary criticism. The disabling of students by the suggestion that there are mysteries in the craft can be traced to the more pretentious forms of literary élitism which some critics of all persuasions have paraded. In a recent book published by the Clarendon Press called *Beyond*

Deconstruction: the Uses and Abuses of Literary Theory, Howard Felperin (an American professor now teaching in Australia) has a first chapter entitled 'Leavisism Revisited', with an introductory section 'The Mystification of Plain Talk'. F. R. Leavis was the most distinguished of the English critics who confidently evolved humane judgements from practical literary criticism – at one point in his career running a periodical significantly called *Scrutiny*. Felperin satirizes the sloppier followers of the tradition established by this senior figure. The extract which follows, describing Felperin's reactions to their writing and their conversation, would be straightforwardly comic were it not for the damage that these kinds of pronouncements have caused:

> What I discovered was that an author's prose can be 'crisp', or if he is not careful, 'brittle'; his moral outlook 'buoyant' and 'life-affirming' (unless of course it is 'life-denying'); his work 'central' or 'essential' or 'marginal'. (To what and for whom was not made explicit, unless it was 'life' or the 'great tradition'.) The only authors who seemed to be consistently regarded as 'central' and 'essential', for whatever it is worth, were Shakespeare and Jane Austen. The critic, in turn, supposed himself to write out of his 'inward possession' of the work, to seek a 'realized experience' in it, to strive for 'completeness of response' to it, but most often seemed to entertain 'worries' about its artistic, and especially, its moral status until he could finally dismiss it as 'easy' or 'unearned' or 'self-indulgent'. He thereby proved himself a reader or critic – never an interpreter or scholar or even student – of 'sensibility' and 'judgement', superior by implication to the author he had just put in his place.

Professor Felperin's confidence and experience entitle him to be dismissive. But the danger is that if less practised students are awed by the vocabulary of 'polite' criticism, they will regard themselves, rather than the criticism, as inadequate. An English professor, John Lucas, writing recently in *The Times Literary Supplement*, lends his support to the effort to break down persistent false notions in favour of a clear-sighted and progressive look at literature:

> There are still a number of belletristic wine-tasters of literature who offer for inspection a 'refined' taste, as though it and the 'poetic sensibility' that goes with it can be said to exist as something other than an attempt to place prejudice beyond the reach of argument. For this dying breed the text remains a sacred mystery, to be worshipped from afar, and always under the instructions of the high priests of the temple. It is no doubt painful for them to realize that their attitude to the text is itself a matter for inquiry. But so it is, and indeed the major revolution of the past twenty years has been focused precisely here: on attitudes to or relationships with the text. To speak with what I hope is permissible looseness,