

Literature and Criticism



H. Coombes

To conclude the section on a strongly positive note, indicating two different ways of functioning of poetic thought different but having certain fundamental elements in common, we can consider first a poem by Blake, then an excerpt from 'Antony and Cleopatra'. Here is Blake's 'A Poison Tree':

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath
I did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow
I water'd it in fears,
- and morning with my tears;
I sunn'd it with smiles,
with soft deceitful wiles;
it grew both day and night,

PELICAN BOOKS

LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

The author of *Literature and Criticism* was a Gloucestershire man who was educated at Tewkesbury and Cambridge. After a decade's schoolteaching in the industrial Midlands, he did extra-mural and W.E.A. lecturing in his own county for several years. He wrote books on Edward Thomas and T. F. Powys. H. Coombes died in 1980.

H. COOMBES

LITERATURE AND
CRITICISM

*Discussion, suggestion, formulation,
are fertilizing when they are frank and sincere. . . .
Be generous and delicate and pursue the prize.*

HENRY JAMES



PENGUIN BOOKS

IN ASSOCIATION WITH CHATTO & WINDUS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

—
First published by Chatto & Windus 1953
Published in Pelican Books 1963
Reprinted 1965, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1975,
1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981

—
Copyright © the estate of H. Coombes, 1953
All rights reserved

—
Made and printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd,
Aylesbury, Bucks
Set in Monotype Baskerville

Except in the United States of America,
this book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise,
be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated
without the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed
on the subsequent purchaser

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
INTRODUCTORY NOTE	7
1 Rhythm	17
2 Rhyme	32
3 Imagery	43
4 Poetic Thought	64
5 Feeling	88
6 Diction	115
PASSAGES FOR CRITICISM	138
BOOK LIST	157
INDEX	159

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Messrs Constable and Co. Ltd for their kind permission to use the passage by George Meredith; to Mr T. S. Eliot and to Messrs Faber and Faber Ltd for passages from *The Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot 1909-1935* and from *Four Quartets*; to Mrs Frieda Lawrence and Messrs William Heinemann Ltd for the D. H. Lawrence passages, and to the same publishers for the extract from *Swinburne's Collected Poetical Works*; to Dr F. R. Leavis and Messrs Chatto and Windus for the passage, on page 9 from *The Common Pursuit*, and to the same publishers for the two poems from *The Collected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg*; to the Oxford University Press for the poem and extracts from *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* and *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, by G. F. Lahey, s.j.; to Mrs Helen Thomas and Messrs Faber and Faber Ltd for the poem from *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*; to Mrs W. B. Yeats and Messrs Macmillan and Co. Ltd for the poem and extract from *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, and to the same publishers, by permission of the Trustees of the Hardy Estate, for the two poems from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*.

H.C.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

BROADLY speaking, we can say that a good literary critic, when he is practising his 'art' – that is to say, when he is committing his criticism to paper – is characteristically engaged in doing two things, or one of two things: he gives us, as completely and as clearly as he can, his considered response to a writer, to a play, a novel, a poem, an essay, and so can help us to a fuller enjoyment and understanding of the experience in and behind the writing; or he reveals, by examining a piece of writing in detail, the elements in the writing which combine to make its particular quality. In practice, of course, these two activities usually go together: a good critic, knowing that his account and evaluation of an author must depend on the actual words written by the author, supports his fundamental remarks and judgements with pieces (however slight) of examined text, the text out of which his judgements rise. When we come across a hazy account, in general terms, of an author or of a piece of writing, we may conclude that a mediocre critic is at work, and that he is probably approaching his author with some degree of predisposition, perhaps with some admixture of prejudice or favouritism. Very often such a critic would give himself away if forced to analyse his author in detail. The fact that his favouritism or prejudice may be unconscious does not excuse his lack of critical discipline. A critic should be as fully conscious as possible of what he is doing.

The validity of this little book depends upon the belief that the character of a writer's whole achievement can only be felt and assessed by responding sensitively to the way in which he uses words, and that the capacity to make such a response can be formed or greatly enhanced by a training in literary criticism.

D. H. Lawrence says some excellent things about critics and criticism:

Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticizing. Criticism can never be a science: it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values that science ignores. The touch-stone is emotion, not reason. We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else. All the critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form, all this pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of books in an imitation-botanical fashion, is mere impertinence and most dull jargon.

A critic must be able to *feel* the impact of a work of art in all its complexity and its force. To do so, he must be a man of force and complexity himself, which few critics are. A man with a paltry, impudent nature will never write anything but paltry, impudent criticism. And a man who is *emotionally* educated is rare as a phoenix. The more scholastically educated a man is generally, the more he is an emotional boor.

More than this, even an artistically and emotionally educated man must be a man of good faith. He must have the courage to admit what he feels, as well as the flexibility to *know* what he feels. So Sainte-Beuve remains, to me, a great critic. And a man like Macaulay, brilliant as he is, is unsatisfactory, because he is not honest. He is emotionally very alive, but he juggles his feelings. He prefers a fine effect to the sincere statement of his aesthetic and emotional reaction. He is quite intellectually capable of giving us a true account of what he feels. But not morally. A critic must be emotionally alive in every fibre, intellectually capable and skilful in essential logic, and then morally very honest.

These statements of Lawrence are not given here for simple and wholesale swallowing. For instance, we must be sure we know what he intends when he 'opposes' reason to emotion, and what he means by 'essential logic'. But the passage will be found to bear much pondering, and it raises radical issues with the insight and strength and certitude that belong to a fine critic.

Side by side with it we may consider the following paragraph by F. R. Leavis (he is discussing an American critic's belief that the intention of Henry James in his novels was closely bound up with a certain philosophical system, that in fact the writing of the novels depended largely on the author's having adopted that system):

But what I have to insist on is that intention in the important sense can only be determined by the tests applied in literary criticism. The analysis and judgement of works of literary art belong to the literary critic, who is one in so far as he observes a disciplined relevance in response, comment and determination of significance. He is concerned with the work in front of him as something that should contain within itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise. The more experience – experience of life and literature together – he brings to bear on it the better, of course; and it is true that extraneous information may make him more percipient. But the business of critical intelligence will remain what it was: to ensure relevance of response and to determine what is actually *there* in the work of art. The critic will be especially wary how he uses extraneous knowledge about the writer's intentions. Intentions are nothing in art except as realized, and the tests of realization will remain what they were. They are applied in the operation of the critic's sensibility; they are a matter of his sense, derived from his literary experience, of what the living thing feels like – of the difference between that which has been willed and put there, or represents no profound integration, and that which grows from a deep centre of life. These tests may very well reveal that the deep animating intention (if that is the right word) is something very different from the intention the author would declare.

As with the Lawrence passage there are things here which should be clarified by further discussion but which are outside our range of the moment: 'profound integration', for example. But the gist of the passage, namely the emphasis put on the necessity for the critic of attending firmly to the 'work in front of him', is forcefully clear, and what the paragraph says is relevant to the purpose of this book, making due allowance for the more elementary nature of such a book.

Now Lawrence is a great creative writer with his own 'vision' of life and his own utterance; Leavis is 'only' a superb literary critic. But creative writing and critical writing are not simple 'opposites', it is not a case of one being 'positive' and the other 'negative'; though in saying that either mode at its fullest may partake of something of the other's activity, we are by no means trying to equate two very different activities; and the creative artist's criticism is

likely to be in some ways of a different kind from the critic's. The subject is too abstruse to be developed at length here. But it can at least be pointed out that Lawrence the creative artist was also a most sensitive and scrupulous literary critic, and that Leavis the literary critic is ultimately concerned with the vitality, the richness, the quality, of life and living. It is significant that Leavis, so often attacked for so-called pedantic analysis, has been one of the strongest and most discriminating (and strong because discriminating) upholders of Lawrence's intense and abundantly-alive genius.

Lawrence flays the kind of analysis that characteristically deals with counting syllables and describing rhyme-schemes and naming metres and stanza-forms. And it still seems necessary to insist, after all the fine critical work of the past twenty or thirty years, that real literary analysis has no affinities with grammatical sentence-analysis. Its accuracy is not that of classification. It is that of a delicate discernment and assessment of the experience, of the 'felt life' (Henry James's phrase) in and behind the words that are being examined. Those who misunderstand or fear literary analysis tend to attack it for being 'niggling', or for 'murdering to dissect', whereas the truth is that it helps to demonstrate the wholeness of meaning, the total effect and significance of the writing. And in doing this it adds immeasurably to the pleasure as to the profit of reading.

If we take a characteristic passage from a work and find it to be muddled in thought, then it is no use abstracting and trusting to the ideas in that work; if a characteristic passage is emotionally false or feeble, then we know it will be no use going to the whole work to enhance our emotional experience. These are very elementary considerations; but some people seem to think, in fact they will affirm, that a book can be valuable *as literature* even if its actual *writing* is weak or bad. They will give contents and writing separate treatment. Comments like the following – this one is taken from a newspaper – are frequent in reviews: 'This is a book that is full of the wisdom of the English countryside, of humanity and humour, and of writing that could scarcely be bet-

tered.' It is plain that the critic who wrote this, isolating certain qualities that he claims for his author, separating them off from the actual writing, has an inadequate conception of literature; his praise is in fact worthless, for if the writing were poor the wisdom and so on wouldn't be there. ('Full of the wisdom of the English countryside' is ambiguous: it could refer to the 'traditional' wisdom of country folk. But from the way the whole sentence is worded it seems certain that he is claiming for his author the great and rare quality of wisdom along with the humanity and humour.)

Writers are all too often judged by their explicit content. For instance: a 'left-wing' critic champions Shelley for his revolutionary doctrines; a 'right-wing' critic champions Tennyson for his nationalism; another critic champions Milton for his explicit moral or religious beliefs. Such critics are supporting their poets because they find in them support for their own beliefs or opinions (though they might not be ready to admit this); they are not sufficiently concerned with the 'sensibility' of the poets, their way of experiencing and expressing life, as revealed in the way they use words; they miss the *reality* of their authors. Sincere analysis would reveal disconcerting flaws in their idols' supposed strengths; it would cause a painful revision of opinions. Incidentally, it might also reveal excellences previously unrecognized. Mr Leavis's paragraph about 'relevance of response' seems to me to state admirably the central point in literary criticism: it is in the words of the writer, in his choice and ordering and organization of language, that his worth shows itself; as a literary artist expressing experiences worth our deepest attention, he matters there or not at all. When Bernard Shaw, writing about *Othello* in 1897, said 'To the brain it is ridiculous, to the ear it is sublime' (and he was echoed in 1948 by Mr Godfrey Tearle, playing the name-part), he was approaching literature in a manner characteristic of many rationalists: that is to say, he split the play into two elements, one of 'content' and one of 'poetry', in particular, poetry as it appeals by its sound only. Such a reading betrays failure to grasp what Shakespeare intended and what he achieved in the play. Most of Shaw's criticism of Shake-

speare depends upon his separation of content from what he usually calls rhetoric, and his judging of each in separation. One of the main endeavours of this book will be to show that good writing is never a matter of embellishing unimportant or paltry content with a 'fine style'.

A critic has to be careful not to use the 'jargon' of criticism thoughtlessly. It is easy to collect a few words like 'sensibility', 'awareness', 'consciousness', and to make a show of adequacy with them. And yet we must have some such terms for practical use, to make discussion possible. The good critic will use them carefully and *honestly*. It will not be out of place to refer here to one or two of the current critical terms, especially as their meaning differs in some cases considerably from that which the same word bears in common use. 'Subtle', for instance, has not in criticism the commonly understood meaning of 'consciously calculating', but implies something sensitively delicate, delicate in the sense of the opposite of crude; the word 'precise', which in everyday use tends to be connected, often derogatorily, with a formal exactitude, is in criticism used as an 'approving' term for shades of emotion as well as for clarity of thought; 'profound' is the antithesis of 'shallow' as applied to emotion or intellect or to both working together; 'sophisticated' is not 'knowingly up-to-date' but implies in criticism the antithesis of 'naïve'. The critic then, especially when he is being explicitly educative, has to have recourse to some set of terms; 'jargon' can't be avoided. But he will see to it, when he uses one of the 'accepted' words, that he has before him the occasion for its use in the writing of the author whom he is helping to reveal; the 'critical' word matters *only* because it helps to reveal the author. It may be useful, valuable, to say that a 'sophisticated' mind is at work in Marvell's poetry; and in some circumstances of discussion the remark may not need enlarging upon. But the *essential* task of the critic is to discover, to *uncover* for us, those particular qualities and that particular working of the mind which justify the use of the adjective. He must *show* the 'sophisticated' mind in all its interesting activity.

A knowledge of the terms used in critical practice has in

itself nothing to do with keenly and freshly responding to a piece of writing. But, conversely, neither does a rigorous training in literary criticism inhibit a fresh and spontaneous response. On the contrary, the better trained we are the more truly and swiftly and pleasurably shall we appreciate and spontaneously evaluate what our author is offering us. And the more we are aware of the particular thing the author is offering, the better it is for our own intellectual and emotional growth. For the moment the claims of these statements must remain simply as claims; it is hoped that adequate justification for them will be felt later in the book.

The method of this book was decided on for the purpose of making demonstration as clear as possible. A good piece of writing, in fact any piece of writing, can be said to be a fusion of elements, and to abstract one element, rhythm for example, or imagery, and to discuss it in comparative isolation, can only be justified on the grounds indicated in our previous sentence. However, a more comprehensive analysis of the pieces quoted in the 'sections' can be made if desired, as well as of the twenty or so passages given later.

Many of the examined passages are excerpts; but I have tried to ensure in every case that the selection should be characteristic, in one way or another, of the author, and I have aimed at avoiding passages the criticism of which would depend to a considerable extent on its context. Especially in the criticism of a passage from a play or a novel we must feel sure about the author's intention: for it may be very different from that which a superficial reading might suggest. To give a clear example: it is irrelevant to charge Shakespeare with bombast when we are reading or listening to some of Othello's speeches; for the bombast is consciously *used*, and Shakespeare shows himself to be, by the whole meaning of the play taking in action and dialogue, the finest critic of his 'hero's' inflations.

Although the selected passages are characteristic of some salient features of their author, no inclusive judgement of any author is intended unless it is actually stated. This book by its intention comes almost entirely into the second category of the critic's work as given at the beginning of this

note, and fundamental judgements and appraisals of an author's whole *œuvre* are outside its scope: we can feel by contact with a single paragraph how fine Conrad can be, but we cannot say we 'know' Conrad until we have grasped the novels as wholes.

The aims of our several Sections can be briefly set out: the first, on Rhythm, points out the difference between a rhythm that is expressive, that has a positive and meaningful and subtle function, and a rhythm that has been adopted mainly or solely for its surface 'musical' value; and the second section's aim is similar in that it examines some ways in which Rhyme is really *used* and some rhyme which is weak or bad. Section three is chiefly concerned with the aptness, the vividness, the suggestiveness of Imagery; again, an expressive use as against an ornamental device. The Poetic Thought section endeavours to distinguish between the statement of 'thoughts' or ideas and the nature of the thought that we call 'poetic'; the implications of 'poetic' are shown to involve feeling and the senses. The gist of the next section is the distinction between emotion and emotionalism, and there is discussion of 'implicit' feeling in language. The Diction section deals with the general 'superiority' of the concrete to the abstract word, and with 'poetic diction' and with the use in poetry of the language spoken in the poet's own day. The final section gives an opportunity of comparing and appraising a number of passages in verse and prose.

Teachers have their own ways of using text-books. With the present one, I myself cannot see a better course than to go through it page by page with the pupils. If time doesn't allow of this, and pupils have to read some or much of it by themselves, there can still follow plentiful discussion in the classroom. That is the essential thing, wherever it is possible: discussion. Close and detailed discussion whether between two or twenty people cannot be anything but profitable. In the second of the epigraphs to this book, Henry James was addressing young novelists; but his words are perfectly applicable to reading. James is one of those who have insisted that our best way of being 'generous' to a writer is to come

by 'delicate' reading to a full appreciation of what he has written.

I believe that most of what may be found valuable in this book derives from the work of F. R. Leavis in modern literary criticism. Other 'influences' there are too, of course: Mr T. S. Eliot, Mr Middleton Murry, Mr I. A. Richards, Mr William Empson, and others. By giving our attention to the criticism of the best critics (ultimately to their best criticism), we can help ourselves to become good, full readers. And the ability to read is a great thing to have; especially in these times when such a quantity of print is expended on such a variety of purposes.

