

The Practical Criticism of Poetry

A Textbook

J. COX and A. E. DYSON

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by

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EDWARD ARNOLD

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*First published 1965
by Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.
41 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP*

Reprinted 1966

Reprinted 1969

Reprinted 1972

Reprinted 1976

Reprinted 1978

Reprinted 1982

ISBN 0 7131 5050 5

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*Printed and bound in Great Britain at
The Camelot Press, Ltd, Southampton*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Authors and Publisher wish to acknowledge the kind permission given by Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd. to reprint *Here* by R. S. Thomas; The Marvell Press to reprint *Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album* by Philip Larkin; Faber & Faber Ltd. to reprint *On the Move* (from *The Senses of Movement*) by Thom Gunn; Harper & Row Inc. and Faber and Faber Ltd. to reprint *Six Young Men* (from *The Hawk in the Rain*) by Ted Hughes; Oxford University Press to reprint *Carrión Comfort* (from *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*) by Gerard Manley Hopkins; Macmillan & Co. Ltd. of New York, London and Canada and the Trustees of the Hardy Estate to reprint *The Shadow on the Stone* (from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*) by Thomas Hardy; Messrs A. P. Watt & Son and The Macmillan Co., New York, to reprint *Longlegged Fly* by W. B. Yeats; Faber & Faber Ltd. and Harcourt Brace & World Inc. to reprint an excerpt from *Little Gidding* (from *Four Quartets*) by T. S. Eliot; Random House Inc. and Faber and Faber Ltd. to reprint *Our Bias* (from *Collected Shorter Poems*) by W. H. Auden; J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., New Directions Inc. and the Literary Executors of the Dylan Thomas Estate to reprint *Fern Hill* (from *Collected Poems*) by Dylan Thomas; International Authors N.V. and Horno N.V. to reprint *A Love Story* (from *Collected Poems*) by Robert Graves; Mr. Ted Hughes to reprint *Sculptor* (from *The Colossus*) by Sylvia Plath.

“To criticise is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticised thing and make it one’s own”.

Henry James, *Preface to ‘What Maisie Knew’*

PREFACE: HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I

This book is intended as an introduction to 'practical criticism' by the direct method. The thirty exercises are each planned to form the basis for a teaching session (though some could be prescribed for written work instead). In our view, practical criticism is best taught by discussion, and the second part of the Introduction sets out some of the problems connected with this. The first part of the Introduction is an account of the aims of practical criticism, and is designed for those who are encountering the technique for the first time. We bear in mind that some students come to it in a very wary mood.

The main part of the book is given to the thirty exercises, which might be considered in two sessions a week over fifteen weeks or, if there is not time for this, in one session a week over most of a teaching year. The first seven exercises are accompanied by our own specimen analyses, or by a record of group discussions by students we have taught. When these are used, the participants should have prepared themselves by reading and thinking about both the poem and the analysis or group discussion. We suggest that the poem should be considered first, and that the analysis or group discussion should be read only after personal impressions of the poem have been formed. One of our main purposes is to counter dogma in criticism, and we hope that students will register disagreements with the critical commentary, as well as agreement when they feel they have been helped. But the essence of this method is that agreements and disagreements should be referred to the text, and closely reasoned; they should not be regarded simply as the assertion of a differing taste. Our commentaries are followed by further questions, which might lead the discussion to new ground.

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The later examples are usually followed by comment and questions, and when they are, students should consider these before the teaching session begins. One or two students might be detailed to report on factual matters, or all students might be told to prepare to report in the event of their being asked. The questions can also be used as a basis for written work, some for short exercises, some for essays of a more extended kind.

Other examples are given without any questions or comments. Here, the compiling of a critical procedure for group discussion might be one of the exercises undertaken by the student.

Naturally a book of this type cannot be comprehensive, but we have tried to bear two general principles in mind:

- (i) Students who work through the thirty examples will have visited some (though by no means all) of the major English poets, and most of the representative *genres*.
- (ii) There may be some occasional use in studying bad poems or bad advertisements, but in our view, the surest critical taste is formed by appreciation of what is good. Our examples are taken, therefore, from poetry that we like. Naturally not all of these examples are equally good, and discrimination remains an important challenge every time. We recognise that not everyone will share our personal likings, and that some fundamental disagreements will arise.

II

The next stage. This book is an introduction to Practical Criticism, and students will wish to proceed from it to a more advanced stage. Our *Modern Poetry: Studies in Practical Criticism* includes twenty critical analyses, all of modern poems, which could be made the basis for further group discussions; and that book also includes a ~~short history~~ of practical criticism from

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I. A. Richards to the present time. We very strongly recommend Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn*. This is an excellent book, indeed perhaps the best existing collection of critical analyses. It provides an introduction to the study of longer poems than we have used here, or in our *Modern Poetry*; and it offers a useful transition from practical criticism to critical theory. Our view is that the experience of practical criticism should come before the study of critical theory, since the second is, or ought to be, dependent upon the first.

III

Glossary. We provide at the end a very short glossary of critical terms. An excellent longer glossary is M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, published in an 8s. paperback by Holt, Rinehart and Winston (New York). We would suggest that groups or classes using this book should have at least one copy of *A Glossary of Literary Terms* available for consultation during discussion, and that group members should find time to read it through and take notes.

Bibliography. Students of practical criticism will clearly be helped by a wider knowledge of the historical and intellectual background of English literature. We provide select bibliographies for more advanced students, with asterisks against the best books from which to begin.

INTRODUCTION

I *Practical Criticism: What is it?*

One question often asked about practical criticism is very basic: why read poems in this way at all? Is 'analysis' not hostile to the spirit of poetry? This doubt has been expressed too often to be easily shrugged aside. Wordsworth's well-known lines are sometimes quoted:

. . . our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;
We murder to dissect . . .

and this is prophetic, it is suggested, of the risks to which modern students of literature are exposed. Is a beautiful poem to be reduced, by the probing intellect, to its bare bones? What is to become of its beauty, its charm and spontaneity, its spiritual life?

A short answer to these doubts is that, in addition to mis-conceiving the nature of practical criticism, they underestimate the poems they appear to defend. They even suggest that our pleasure in poetry is a subjective illusion, which closer acquaintance with the poem cannot sustain. But one has only to trust poems a little to find that such fears are insulting as well as wrong. A poem that is in any degree successful blossoms under our careful attention, and comes into its fullness as we proceed. A really great poem begins, indeed, to take possession of us—not immediately, and at one bound, but insidiously and with stealth, over an unpredictable period of time. An isolated phrase, or a line or a sequence of lines, will return to us, with a strange sense of fitness and familiarity. Where did we hear that, we wonder?—it could scarcely be better put. Or it may be that we forget the poem altogether after analysing it, but coming upon it again later, we are struck by its form and beauty in an altogether new way. It is not exactly that we recall our analysis step by

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step, but rather that the experience of the poem's totality, its uniqueness, captures us more powerfully than before. The analysis has done its work, and the poem has proved all the stronger for it. Our reading includes a new sense of the poem's structure and imagery, its tone and verbal delicacy, its precise effects.

This move towards precision is what practical criticism exists to achieve. The practical criticism of a poem is not the opposite to enjoyment, as students new to it are apt to fear. It is not the substitution of an intellectual pleasure for an aesthetic pleasure, or the diminishing of poetic understanding to a dull routine. On the contrary, it is an opening up of the poem for what it can really be for us: a unique and fascinating experience, carefully wrought by its maker, and fully available only to those with the patience, as well as the sensibility, to recreate. If the poem is a good poem, our analysis begins in pleasure, and deepens that pleasure as we proceed. It makes our pleasure more articulate, and therefore more meaningful. Emotion is enriched and extended by the exercise of thought.

To discuss the careful reading of poems in this manner is to defend it; but is it not careless reading that should more obviously be on trial? We cannot be content to like poems merely at random, and to pay them the compliment of no more than a passing glance; we cannot be content to take from a great poem only what we were expecting from it, as though it were simply a confirmation of something we already knew. The great poem has the power to enrich and extend us, to make us something more than we were before. In its essential greatness, it is unlike any other poem we have ever read; but how is this uniqueness to reach us, unless we attend precisely and in very great detail to what it is? Every word in it counts, every interplay of metre with rhythm, every modulation and nuance of tone. The poet writing the poem has certainly been conscious of many effects he precisely intended; and this precision, for us as for him, is not the opposite to poetic experience; it is the means by which

the poem is achieved. The poet, like any other artist, depends upon an audience which will follow him closely. Like Henry James in the Prefaces to his novels, he will hanker after readers who are not only sensitive and intelligent, but also trained.

So the reader has to co-operate by an active reading of what is in front of him. The poem exists after a fashion on the printed page, and between its covers on the bookshelf, but its real existence is only when in a reader's mind and consciousness it comes alive. What Ruskin had to say about 'seeing' is a useful analogy:

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see.

Ruskin's meaning is that most of us look only hazily at the world about us, noticing the things we expect to see, or are familiar with; the other things, or the finer shades of the things we do see, we either ignore, or distort into the image of what we expect. The artist, says Ruskin, is the man who really 'sees'. He looks with the utmost closeness, and perceives that no two clouds, or trees, or buildings are alike.

In literary terms, the practical critic is the man who really 'sees'. He is not content to reduce the poem in front of him to a cliché or a commonplace; he examines it until its particular reality comes vividly to life. The rewards of such attention are very considerable, since in great poems the words themselves, as well as the experience they convey, are more alive, more revealing and disturbing, than they are in the contexts of every day. 'It is very warm', we say, making the word 'warm' the merest gesture; or, 'it is very simple'—referring perhaps to Wordsworth's Lucy poems, or anything else that we think we can easily understand. But consider the words 'warm' and 'simple' in Dylan Thomas' 'Fern Hill':

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So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise.

'Simple' regains, here, its full vitality, as a word meaning unified, uncomplicated, and therefore invincible; it is the meaning of St. Thomas Aquinas, when he wrote of the simplicity of God. And 'warm' recreates the miracle of creation itself, the flesh-and-blood gladness emerging from coldness and chaos, to know itself triumphantly in a word. One is reminded not only of vivid moments from one's own experiences, but also of other literary usages in the past. There is Shakespeare's Leontes, for instance, in *A Winter's Tale*, when after a sixteen-year vigil of grief and torment, he is shown a statue of his dead wife; not as she used to be in life, but as she would be now, if she were still alive. The sight of the statue, so tormentingly faithful to Hermione, moves him unbearably; until against all expectation, he sees a movement in what he had taken to be stone. 'O, she's warm', he cries—and the miracle of life itself, of flesh and blood replacing the unyielding coldness, is captured in a word. It is moments like these which make the language of Shakespeare and many other great poets so marvellous. Our power to respond to them is nurtured by the training which practical criticism gives.

Basic Approach to a Poem. The purpose of this book is practical, and the various technical matters a student will have to become acquainted with—rhythm and metre for instance, diction and syntax, stanza forms and *genres*—are best learned, with the aid of the glossary, as he goes along. But for the basic approach to each poem, we suggest three main questions that ought to be kept in mind:

- (i) What is it *about*?
- (ii) How is it *done*?
- (iii) Does it succeed?

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As a further guide, we might use the word 'subject' to describe what the poem is 'about', and the term 'content' to describe what it is. We can then consider the poet's attitude to his 'subject', and the nature of his 'content'; and this leads on to a judgment upon the poem itself.

The distinction between 'subject' and 'content' is a clear-cut one; we suggest these terms for convenience, though obviously any other clearly defined terminology will suffice. By 'subject', we signify the poem's public meaning. The poem is 'about' religion, or love, or the fall of man, or wishing to be older or younger than one is, or a cat catching goldfish, and this is its 'subject': the concrete occasion on which it turns. The 'subject' comes straight from the poet's experience of life, and links him with all other poets and readers whose experience in any way touches his own. *Paradise Lost* is a poem 'about' God and Satan, about men and angels, and the fall of men and angels, and the redemption of men. It is also a poem 'about' Christian theology, and is near to the centre of a very important and protracted religious debate.

To establish the 'subject' of a poem in this sense is clearly important, but it does not tell us anything distinguishing about the poem itself. Anyone can write a poem on such themes, with more or less orthodoxy, and the poem may be good or bad. The 'subject' is to this degree general; and though a poet may have his personal insights or emphases, these do not necessarily distinguish him from everyone else. A paraphrase of *Paradise Lost* might be very revealing about its 'subject', but would not begin to explain why we value the poem as we do.

By 'content', in contrast to 'subject', we signify the poem itself; the unique combination of words, rhythms, images, overtones and other effects, which can be recognised as belonging to one period rather than another, and, if the poem is sufficiently distinctive, to one poet rather than another. 'Content' signifies the unique co-existence of a more or less public 'subject' with a