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The Craft of Criticism

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Preface

Students of literature are not short of expositions of principle and examples of practice. What they *are* short of is the sort of thing a craft apprentice gets: specific aid in bridging the gap between the theory and the practice. On the one hand, books of critical theory are available — but such works were never easy and are now becoming both more abstruse and more remote from literary appreciation. On the other hand, there are books of practical criticism — but such works never spell out the principles, if any, underpinning their practice. What seems to be needed, then, is neither more abstract theorising nor more take-it-or-leave-it exemplification but rather explanations given whilst the critical job is in progress — that is to say, in the form of guidance, of appropriate tips.

This book attempts to provide some such combination of principle and practice, as a guide towards what is fundamental to any kind of literary criticism claiming some validity (and what other kind warrants attention?): namely, a *justifiable* appreciation of the words on the page. The bulk of the book consists of practical critiques of poems of various kinds from various periods, all being of interest in their own right, but also illustrating *a variety of critical methods* (for in this area no standard bridge exists for all crossings). But there is no question of matching each poem with one method so as to give a neat simple 'line' on the poem and, eventually, a rota of distinguishable methods (formal, historical, social, psychological, and so on). On the contrary, most methods are likely to be applicable to most poems, *though in very different degrees*. In so far as poems themselves are many-sided so far must an adequate critique be — the craft of criticism often resembling nothing so much as a difficult juggling act in which several objects of different sizes and weights have to be kept in play. Each poem, therefore, is given as full and rich a practical criticism as seems necessary, and relevant points of critical principle underpinning the practice are elucidated, as briefly and plainly as possible, during the process.

Only in the introduction, then, is theory to be found in separation from practice, and even there a number of examples are used. Moreover, all con-

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cepts that might present difficulty owing to the necessary brevity of an introduction are more fully explained in the glossary at the end. In any event, they should, of course, become gradually clearer and subtler as they crop up in different contexts during the critiques that form the body of the work.

Chronological order in the arrangement of these critiques has been deliberately avoided in order not to deflect attention from critical to historical concerns (though the fact that historical scholarship is often relevant to practical criticism is not overlooked).

Verse has been preferred to prose, firstly, because it more easily yields a variety of complete works of suitable length, and secondly, because while involving no theoretical difference in critical approach (if narrative verse is included) in practice it tends to a greater concentration of literary effects.

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Introduction

As this book is to move from the mainly theoretical, in the introduction, to the mainly practical, in the critiques forming the body of the work, it will be appropriate for this introduction itself to move from the more abstractly theoretical to the less. That is to say, from discussion of *Criticism* to discussion of the *Craft* by which critical principles are put to practical use. In each case some oversimplification will be unavoidable, since both topics are highly complex. But that may be no bad thing. As the end in view is a practical one (see the preface) this introduction can properly be used as a sort of scaffolding to be eventually discarded.

I

What, then, is literary criticism? Why do we need it? And why is it so much concerned with *how* literature* means rather than *what* it means?

Too much ink, it may be objected, has already been spilt over such questions. But some answers must be given, however sketchy, if only that we may know what we are talking about and why it should be worth talking about.

However, fairly straightforward answers, commonsensical rather than metaphysical, will serve our turn, provided that three things – questioned by today's trendier theorists – are taken as given. The first is that the world and other people exist in their own right (not as mere fictions, unsuitable therefore as material for literary fictionalising); the second, that language can and does communicate meaning; the third (a logical consequence of the first and second), that works of literature carry meanings, even across the centuries, that can be communicated – and may well be worth the deciphering since, though perhaps fictional themselves, they bear some relation to some sort of reality.

*All words starred on their first appearance are commented upon – if necessary at some length – in the glossary. Often the glossary will also be found to provide material for further discussion.

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If the first two assumptions were not granted, there would be little point in doing, saying, or studying *anything*; and if the third were not, it would be difficult indeed to account for the zeal with which authoritarians over the ages have banned or burned books (and sometimes their authors). Certainly, not to accept the first assumption in practice — as distinct from engaging in a purely theoretical exercise — would clearly lead to disaster. The second seems adequately justified by the everyday facts of existence (and those who argue against it *cannot* logically sustain their case since they must illogically exclude the language of their own argument from it). The third assumption, by this fact: that though much literature is *not* worthwhile, when the dross is sorted out (one good reason for criticism) what remains is a great cultural bank, so to speak, a publicly available hoard of non-monetary treasure. Literature is the most memorable means by which human perceptions, wisdom, experience, and feelings, from fields far more varied than any one individual could command, can be handed on. In this above all, we differ from other animals.

There is, then, good reason for the practice of a *literary* criticism: the deciphering, explanation, and critical appreciation of literary meaning* (including, of course, emotional meaning). A process normally to be followed — at any rate by those criticising for the benefit of others — by the discrimination of works more worth reading, on various grounds, from those less worth the trouble. The word 'criticism', however, is often used to cover very different activities related to literature: in particular, *scholarship* (a concern for the facts of literature), or *metacriticism** (a concern for the significance* of literature, e.g. how it impinges on morality or politics, what it unwittingly reveals of contemporary social attitudes, and so on).

These are clearly very different concerns, in principle, from those of *criticism* proper (or 'literary' or 'intrinsic'* criticism) whose concern is with the full meaning of the text itself, with its identity. To put it another way, criticism is concerned with what the work *is*, metacriticism with what it is (usually unwittingly) a *sign of*, and scholarship with *information about it*. To establish the correct text of a Shakespeare play would be scholarship. To use the play as a guide to the refinements of Elizabethan modes of feeling, thinking, or dressing, or to the personality of Shakespeare; or, as many Marxist critics would, to assess it in terms of its likely political effects — all these would be metacritical activities. To establish the meaning and qualities of the play itself and assess their literary value would be criticism.

In practice, there is some unavoidable overlapping. The scholarly editor, for instance often has to choose on literary-critical grounds alone between

a reading in the Folio (the collected Shakespeare plays of 1623) and a reading in a Quarto (one of the smaller earlier volumes containing one play). On the other hand, the critic will be unable even to understand the text in its simplest sense, without the aid of some scholarly apparatus to explain obsolete words, references, and ideas. And clearly, when the meta-critic uses the play as a document to add some subtle extra to another subject — biography, sociology, morality, or whatever — he must at least have a correct text and a correct understanding of it, if his additions are to carry any weight.

To take an example, almost at random:

THESEUS: Now fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
 Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
 Another moon — but O, methinks how slow
 This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,
 Like to a stepdame or a dowager
 Long withering out a young man's revenue.
 HIPPOLYTA: Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
 Four nights will quickly dream away the time,
 And then the moon, like to a silver bow
 Now bent in heaven, shall behold the night
 Of our solemnities.

Here are the opening speeches of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We need editorial scholarship to tell us the contemporary meanings of several words: *lingers*, delays; *stepdame*, stepmother; *dowager*, widow with a jointure or dower; *withering out*, being a charge on, causing to decrease. It is generations of editors, too, who decided on the punctuation, since slavish acceptance of the antiquated punctuation of the Folio or Quarto texts would often positively obscure the sense for a modern audience. As further aid to comprehension, editors have divided the text into acts and scenes, for neither the Folio nor any Quarto records scene divisions, and only the Folio is divided into acts. The Folio and the first Quarto of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are the chief authorities for the text. Here and there, though, they differ; and here and there neither makes good sense; so if an editor simply copied them he would not be giving literary critics the facts they need: those of a good text and the explanations of its contemporary references and shades of meaning. Most editors give line ten above as 'New-bent'; presumably assuming that 'Now bent' requires '*the* silver bow'. But 'Now bent' is what is given by both Folio and Quarto texts. That *may* be a repeated misprint, but it does not seem an impossible reading, if we imagine a bit of stage business, and re-punctuate:

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And then the moon, like to a silver bow [*pointing*]
(Now bent in Heaven), shall behold . . .

But do not such decisions force the scholarly editor to be something of a literary critic as well? Indeed they do, as do decisions about what constitutes a scene and what is the better reading when Folio and Quarto differ.

The critic will be primarily concerned with such matters as the aptness of these lines as an opening gambit. Do they give necessary information, in a manner that the audience can take in while still settling down? Do they establish an appropriate mood? Is the language right for courtly rulers (as distinct from the fairies, rude mechanicals, and lovers, each of which groups has its own style)? He might point out how aptly, by means of long vowels and extra stresses, the language *enacts* as well as states its meaning in:

Ó, méthinks hów slów
This olđ moón wánes!

And so on. Yet before he can start understanding the text in this deeper sense, he must understand it in the simplest sense of knowing what the words mean; and therefore, since some of the meanings are obsolete, must become a scholar, at any rate to the extent of absorbing what scholars have established.

The metacritic might be most interested in what lines five and six reveal of Elizabethan social attitudes to money or to the elderly, or in the type of personality that could so offhandedly unite, through this simile, monetary toughness with amorous tenderness, apparently without any sense of incongruity. But the latter interest — depending on a judgement of tone — surely has much in common with a critical interest in the character of Theseus (though the literary critic would be using this material to move inward, into the play; the metacritic to move outward, towards Elizabethan psychology in general). Clearly, any metacritical statements as to the extra-literary meaning (the significance) of the literary meaning have no chance of being valid unless they are based on a correct text and a correct literary understanding of it. They are the metacritic's *evidence* — and scholarship and criticism, whether his own or someone else's, are what provide it.

In such ways, then, distinctions clear enough in principle become blurred in practice, become a matter of different emphasis rather than absolute difference. Nevertheless, we can now restate, more fully, what 'criticism' is, so far as this book is concerned. It is what is left over when metacriticism and scholarship have been set aside.

What precisely is it that is left over? It is the endeavour to come to as full an understanding of a literary work as possible, an understanding that is both judicial and sympathetic — and justifiable: supportable, that is to say, by reasonable evidence, as against mere assertions of liking or disliking. It is, in short, an endeavour to get out of a work everything that is really there, and not to read into it anything that is not.

One more example, to sum up:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight . . .

If we had a metacritical interest in social history we might be struck to find that the curfew — introduced and enforced in the early Middle Ages — was still being sounded, pointlessly, in the mid eighteenth century, when Gray's 'Elegy' was composed. If our interest were linguistic we might note that the original, literal meaning of the word, *couvre-feu* (cover-fire) still lingered, at least for Gray (but that noting would depend on a previous literary-critical perception, as we shall see). If our interest were historical or theological, we might recall that the ploughman in medieval writings and sermons was a symbolic figure, symbolising man as he ought to be, or even Christ (but that recollection would depend on a literary-critical sensitivity — to Gray's subtle hint at our medieval past through the word 'curfew'). As critics, our interest in these facts would not be historical or linguistic, but literary. We should be interested in what, for example, 'curfew' contributed to a finer understanding of the poem rather than in what it contributed to a finer understanding of eighteenth-century social customs. So we should start by noting that the phrase 'tolls the knell' gives a double sense to 'parting'; so that it means 'dying' as well as merely 'departing'. The dead march of the metre, we might then note, reinforces the solemnity imparted by 'tolls'. It is at this point that the bit of scholarly information about 'curfew' might come to seem relevant — if we had a literary sensibility sufficiently trained to be receptive to such relevances. Knowing that the curfew had long ceased to be enforced, we should see that to literate readers in Gray's age, as to us, the word must have carried its history with it, bearing the mind back through all the generations of the churchyard to the Dark Ages of a gothic past. A little biographical scholarship would assure us that Gray could hardly have been unaware of the original meaning, *'couvre-feu'*. And of course the poem supports this, for the personifying 'knell' suggests that a damper of dark-

ness is putting out the fires of life as well as the fires of the day. Not surprisingly then, the opening of the second stanza, 'Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight' takes on a doubly eerie quality: at once that of the day's death and of a human deathbed, as one might suppose it in cases of easy, 'natural' dying. All perfectly appropriate for an elegy in a country churchyard where 'the rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep'. And especially for such an elegy as this, which is to range widely over the current eighteenth-century world of great and humble and go far back in time, always moving between concrete examples and general musings on life and death. But there is more to it than this. The sense of pastness infused into the poem by 'curfew' is what makes 'the ploughman' — significantly not 'a ploughman' — a little more than realistically meaningful. He is not a fully symbolic medieval figure; on the other hand he is not just any old country labourer. In so far as we are sensitive to the rhythms of lines two and three, which do wind slowly and plod wearily with the aid of long vowels, alliteration, and iambics* that are so often nearly spondees,* we incline to a realistic interpretation. In so far as we are sensitive to tone* (which also alerts us to the timeless quality of this scene — in the days before factory farming) we incline a little to the symbolic (so that later on we are prepared to accept general human conclusions drawn from the particular 'rude forefathers' mouldering in country graves). The ploughman is thus sensed as typical and timeless, silhouetted on the glimmering border of day and night, life and death. Like that 'curfew', and in part because of it, he carries the mind back through the ages of our history — the same history that is (symbolically) writ small in the churchyard, with its village Hampdens, little tyrants, mute inglorious Miltons, and petty Cromwells.

Scholarship, criticism, and metacriticism, then, are interdependent in practice though independent in principle. Scholarship, however, is merely a servant of criticism (and itself requires a trained critical sensibility). Metacriticism, of the best kind, is valuable in its own right, but depends on previous, just criticism; since obviously conclusions drawn from a falsely interpreted text cannot themselves claim any truth.

There are good logical reasons, then, for giving criticism priority, for trying first of all to sharpen and methodise whatever good sense and literary sensibility nature has provided us with. Hence the attempt, in the critiques to follow, to establish the full *meaning* of the poems themselves rather than their *significance* in relation to something else; to apprehend what they *are* in all their richness rather than what they may (unwittingly) be *signs of* — an attempt, however, that may sometimes require reference to relevant scholarly information or, more rarely, to apparent metacritical significances.

But there are other reasons for giving criticism priority. What is read becomes part of the reader's life, and in so far as it affects him by way of subtle personal change, we have a transfer from art to life that is not of a metacritical kind. Such transfers, however, do not normally — and never wholly — come through pure subject-matter or paraphrasable messages. The meaning of a work of literature will also be a matter of its *qualities*. As Shelley said in the *Defence of Poetry* the value of creative writing lies not only in the facts and messages it may offer to the mind, but in that it 'awakens and enlarges the mind itself'.

Language communicates far more than information. For instance pity, fear, indignation, irony, wit, tenderness, eroticism, humour — and it does so in many ways. So the mind is 'enlarged' by literature not only in the area of thinking but also in the areas of feeling, intuition, and sensing; it is 'awakened' when things dulled by habit are seen freshly, when the hum-drum is made strange, when new contemplation (as in Gray's 'Elegy') is made to grow out of old facts. Literature, in short, is enlivening in a world where many factors conspire to deaden. That is why criticism is more concerned with *how* literature means than with *what* it means. And that brings us to the craft by which critical principle is put into practice.

II

As we have delimited 'criticism', a work on the craft of it may be practicable and useful — though not easy; for no one method, no 'correct' approach appropriate for all literary work is to be found even for intrinsic criticism alone. Since writers, whether in verse* or prose,* may write about anything, in any mood, with any attitude to their audience, and in any style, it is obvious that flexibility and openness must combine with discrimination as prime requirements for a critic. The only indisputable principle of approach seems to be that of *pluralism*: the principle that there are more ways than one to the heart of works of creative literature — though certain works in practice do seem strongly to invite one approach more than others, according as the work itself is clearly, say, realistic or fantastic, comic or tragic, psychological or sociological. Most works, however, are many-sided, even if one side is considerably more prominent than others; so it is always desirable to look round before leaping to a conclusion — and therefore to cultivate ways of testing for other potentially profitable approaches.

It is for this reason that criticism seems to be better referred to as a 'craft' than anything else. Those who have claimed it as a science have usually been metacritics. The mode of being a literary work (which comes

to life only when read) is so intangible and has so many facets, that it has always been tempting to move prematurely from study of the work itself to study of its *causes* in the writer or society (criticism then becoming a metacritical form of amateur psychology, biography, or history) or else to study of its *effects* on the audience (a form of amateur sociology, anthropology, or mass-psychology), while imagining that by doing so one was obtaining insights into literature. Since these subjects are more amenable to scientific treatment than works of creative literature themselves which, unlike the material world, are not suitable for controlled experiment or mathematical quantification, there could be at least the illusion of a 'scientific' criticism.

Of course, causes and effects do have to be studied in criticism proper. The point is that there is a difference between examining *in the work* the cause of some effect in the reader and examining the cause of that cause in the writer or his society; between examining *in the work* some effect achieved by the writer and examining the effect of that effect on the reading public. Such examination of *literary* causes and effects cannot properly be described as scientific — for the reason given above — however precise the examination may be. Nor can it be considered an art,* since it is far more descriptive than creative.

Those who have claimed that criticism is, or can be, an art have done so on the grounds that just as creative literature organises the raw material of life into meaningful and pleasing patterns, so criticism may organise *its* raw material, literature. Now of course there is nothing to stop a writer using another writer's material as a springboard for a creative leap of his own, but in that case he will simply be producing a piece of parasitic art — itself inviting criticism. It will not fulfil the special task of criticism, as we define it: namely, the humble but useful one of bringing about a better understanding of someone else's creative work. Such a task requires sensibility, as science does not, but does not require original creativity, as art does, and seems therefore best described as a craft.

It is, however, a unique kind of craft, since its raw material is in fact *immaterial* — and this gives rise to the critic's special difficulty: the need to be subjectively objective,* or more accurately, objectively subjective.* These are points of such importance that they deserve further comment.

True enough, a literary work does have some sort of material existence, usually that of paper and printer's ink. But that material existence is trivial. It makes no difference to a poem, as such, whether it be printed in black or red, on thick paper or thin. Its real existence is what takes place in the mind when it is read or heard. So we can properly say that a literary work's material existence is insignificant, its significant existence