

THE SOCIAL
MISSION OF
ENGLISH CRITICISM

1848—1932


CHRIS BALDICK

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

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C. B.

ABBREVIATIONS

Where abbreviation allows, page references for certain works frequently cited appear within the text in square brackets. The abbreviations for these works appear in the key below. Longer references and other notes are indicated numerically in the usual way, and appear at the end of each chapter.

- CE** F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1933).
- CPW** Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (11 vols., Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1960-77) (see Bibliography for titles of individual volumes).
- FC** F. R. Leavis, *For Continuity* (Cambridge, 1933).
- FRP** Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; Harmondsworth, 1979).
- PC** I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (1929).
- PLC** I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924; 3rd edn. 1928; reset 1967).
- SAP** I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (1926).
- SE** T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1932; 3rd edn. 1951).
- SW** T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920; 7th edn. 1950).

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1. INTRODUCTORY: CRITICISM AND ITS HISTORY

The precept given by a wise man, as well as a great critic, for the construction of poems, is equally true as to states.

Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

In recent years much ink has been shed to the effect that a 'crisis' is besetting the study of English literature, particularly in higher education. As the following chapters may help to show, this is nothing new: from the very beginning, English Literature as a 'subject' has been founded upon a series of uncertainties and conflicts. Indeed it can be and has been argued that for a discipline professing *criticism* a sense of crisis is an appropriate, even favourable, condition. Leaving aside this general consideration, what is new in the recent disputes over the study of literature is the existence of a growing 'opposition' movement which has begun to question some of the long-standing assumptions of traditional literary criticism embedded in the very title 'English Literature': both the status of Great (and hence capitalized) Literature and the Englishness of the subject's concerns and methods. One of the major contentions of this opposition is that traditional English Studies are 'ideological' — a claim which is often greeted with some scepticism, for two related reasons: one a problem of terminology and the other a problem of approach.

In the first place it is objected that nothing could be more harmless, apolitical, and undogmatic than the study and criticism of literary works; surely it is the femin-, Marx-, structural-, and other -ists who are 'ideological' in importing their doctrines into this neutral area (not to say paranoid in typically detecting conspiracies where none exist)? The objection employs a particular sense of the term 'ideology', first used by Napoleon Bonaparte to brand his democratic political opponents as impractical philosophical dogmatists. This sense was revived by American political 'theorists' in

the Cold War for much the same purposes and today enjoys currency in journalistic usage; it refers to a conscious and explicit theory adopted by a minority. On the other hand the Marxist sense of the term adopted by the 'opposition' in literary studies has a wider and more complex reference, denoting those usually unspoken assumptions upon which the most untheoretical, undogmatic, and 'common-sense' arguments rest; in particular the assumption that the existing institutions and values of society are natural and eternal rather than artificial and temporary.¹

This understanding of ideology, incidentally, has no need whatever (in contrast with the Bonapartist usage) to invent conspiracies, since it sees ideologies simply as the line of least resistance taken in interpreting existing circumstances; as 'lazy' reflections of the world around them, which either do not bother or do not want to consider the evidence unfavourable to their implicit tenets. It is this charge (to simplify drastically) which is being levelled at conventional literary study; the fact that the guardians of traditional approaches do not like to regard themselves as -ists of any kind does not affect its validity.

The second problem, which compounds the unhappy incompatibility of terms, follows from the nature of ideologies according to this wider conception. For if the major common factor of ideologies is their assumption that the existing order of things (whether it be 'femininity', private property, or the artistic portrayal of 'human nature') originates in nature and carries on into eternity, then as far as the theoretical refutation of such an assumption goes — which is well short of its (to borrow a phrase) practical criticism — a major if not predominant role in the counter-argument must be allotted to historical example. Exposure of logical inconsistencies in an ideological argument can go a certain distance, but it is only history which can challenge any assumption of 'timelessness' at its root. The irony of the recent debates is that those most eager to argue that English studies are ideological are often those whose adopted methods are precisely the least equipped to establish such a contention. There has been much that is valuable and stimulating in the belated absorption of structuralism into English studies in

Britain; yet its paralysing anti-historical tendencies have severely blunted the very critique which many of the structuralists wish to make of traditional 'English Literature'. Without recourse to history, in short, the contention that this traditional model is ideological will remain unconvincing.²

The purpose of this book is in part to redress that shortcoming within the current questioning of 'English Literature', and within the attention of its students generally. I have found in discussing my preparation of this work with undergraduate students of English in every case an astonishment at the comparative novelty of their chosen subject within the history of higher education. It would seem that the study of English Literature is accepted by most of its practitioners as a 'natural' activity without an identifiable historical genesis. With some qualification, the same goes for the discourse — literary criticism — which dominates the subject. It is perhaps generally known, for example, that Eliot said there was a dissociation of sensibility in the seventeenth century and that Arnold and Leavis claimed in some way a moral purpose for literature; but just why they should have been moved to say such things (and it was certainly not in order to provide topics for examination papers) is a question which seems rarely to be asked within a discipline so unconcerned to examine its own history. Even leaving aside the very favourable conditions which it provides for ideological assumptions of timelessness and naturalness, such a state of affairs is in itself an unhealthy one for literary study, fostering within it a passive and indeed uncritical attitude. With these considerations in mind, my approach has been a deliberately unsophisticated attempt to drag back into the light the views taken by the founders of modern English Studies and literary criticism regarding the wider social effects and aims of this activity; to restore to what is now a severely truncated vision of criticism's recent past those neglected but essential statements of its original purpose as an active participant in society.

Accordingly, the following chapters will be concerned with the development of certain ideas of literary criticism's social function in an important period of English criticism, attempting in particular to trace the contribution of Matthew

Arnold to the literary-critical renaissance of the 1920s and early 1930s represented by the writings of T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and F. R. and Q. D. Leavis. The achievement of these critics will be examined as part of a common development of the ideal of 'practical criticism' — to be understood here in a sense wider than that of the technical exercise to which the phrase usually refers, denoting rather a 'practicality' in which criticism seeks a real practical effect upon society, directly or indirectly. First, the prose writings of Matthew Arnold will be surveyed as a consistent unit including not only strictly literary but also theological, political, and educational works, illustrating the extent to which Arnold expanded the duties of literary criticism into these areas, and how, in turn, his conception of society transformed his vision of the function of criticism. After a brief examination of Walter Pater's development of Arnoldian ideas, some of the early arguments for the educational importance of the study of English Literature will be reviewed in Chapter 3, in particular those emphasizing the possibilities of this subject as a civilizing and humanizing agency of beneficial social consequences; and some of the initial problems of the subject at university level will be touched on. Chapter 4 will be devoted to the impetus given to these arguments by the war of 1914-18, and the promotion of English as a study conducive to national pride and unity. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will examine in turn the early critical writings of T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and the Leavises, attempting to show how they revived and modified in different ways the work of Arnold, in 'practical' directions. Finally, the concluding chapter will review this line of thinking on the importance of literary criticism, itemizing the common characteristics of the writers examined and the senses in which they made criticism 'practical'. This introductory chapter aims first to set the object of our investigation within the context of the history of criticism.

Discussion of criticism is apt to be considered a rather introspective diversion. But it is a fact too often forgotten that the real content of the school and college subject which goes under the name 'English Literature' is not literature in the primary sense, but *criticism*. Every school student in

British education is required to compose, not tragic dramas, but essays in criticism. The historical study of criticism is needed at least to explain this now widespread practice; and it deserves to be defended further against charges of parasitism: as if criticism itself were not sufficiently removed from its source and occasion in literary works, why tolerate a discourse set apart at two (and in parts of this chapter, for example, even at three) removes from the real object of literary studies? Charges of parasitism begin from the assumption — very easily made, for a number of reasons — that literary criticism as an activity owes its entire existence to the literary works upon which, like an ungrateful child, it presumes to pass comment. And in English literature from the Restoration onwards, there is a whole tradition of bitter jibes by authors against critics to endorse and win sympathy for this scale of priority: Fielding's description in *Tom Jones*, for example, of critics as reptiles, or Byron's allegation that it was the critics who killed John Keats. In one extremely hypothetical sense this assumption may be true, in that if there were no Literature there would be no criticism — and even this remote case is doubtful (if Literature did not exist, it can be argued, it would have to be invented — a task for criticism). Yet literary history shows that criticism does not 'shadow' some primary literary progenitor in any such simple fashion. In the first place, the recurrent case of authors neglected in their own time but acclaimed decades or centuries later is only the most noticeable aspect of a reverse process by which criticism 'creates' what is accepted as Literature. And furthermore, there are important instances of major lines of literary work failing to 'produce' a critical offspring at all for very long periods: the English novel, most remarkably, went through its classical period in the nineteenth century to no significant critical accompaniment, while Shakespeare and Wordsworth were abundantly discussed all the while. Such time-lags indicate that the history of literary criticism moves according to laws to a great degree autonomous from those of its alleged parent, that the productive and receptive sides of literary history do not make anything like a perfect fit, and therefore that other factors apart from literary works themselves go into the making of criticism. These are the

considerations which justify the historiography of criticism as a distinct study, the third 'level' (if the hierarchy still stands) accounting, among other things, for the discrepancy between the first two.

Unfortunately most histories of criticism adopt the 'parasitic' view in which criticism emerges one-dimensionally from primary literary sources. The problem was well put by George Watson in his book *The Literary Critics*, which represents the first sustained attempt to break out of it:

But all previous histories — Saintsbury and Atkins in their day, as much as Wellek and Wimsatt in ours — have assumed that what we call literary criticism is, with some embarrassing exceptions, a single activity, and that its history is the story of successive critics offering different answers to the same questions. We may call this the Tidy School of critical history.³

Watson offers instead 'a record of chaos marked by sudden revolution',⁴ and a specification of criticism according to three types, Legislative, Theoretical, and Descriptive; his own account covering only the third category. A thorough history of criticism would need to go still further in refusing the 'tidy' method by recognizing among other things that critics and periods of criticism differ in their degrees of critical self-consciousness. Far from restricting itself to a naive 'description', the general tendency in English criticism since Dryden has been towards a heightened self-consciousness in the major critics (or, put another way, it is the most critically self-conscious writers who stand out as the major critics). Criticism passes from the subordinate position of defender of poetry to a position of self-appointed authority from which it can turn to the offensive, in social as well as literary comment: since Arnold in particular, English criticism has, as Patrick Parrinder has put it, lost its innocence.⁵

The kind of distinction I have in mind is best exemplified in one of the shortest but still most stimulating histories of criticism: T. S. Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), which adopts the important proposition that 'our criticism, from age to age, will reflect the things that the age demands'.⁶ Eliot rejects the view, similar to the 'anti-parasitical' arguments discussed above, that criticism is

a symptom of decadence, and attempts instead to explain criticism's emergence historically as a necessary adjustment to changed conditions of authorship. Rather than simply relate the successive 'contributions' of critics, he sets out to ask why, for example, Dryden and Johnson should want to write about poetry and poets. From such questions, Eliot is able to proceed to the problem of what we have referred to as the relative 'self-consciousness' of critics. He points out, for example, the advantages enjoyed by Samuel Johnson: 'Had he lived a generation later, he would have been obliged to look more deeply into the foundations, and so would have been unable to leave us an example of what criticism ought to be for a civilisation which, being settled, has no need, while it lasts, to enquire into the function of its parts.'⁷ By contrast with this confidently 'naive' criticism, modern criticism has to function in a world where large assumptions can no longer be relied upon:

... when the poet finds himself in an age in which there is no intellectual aristocracy, when power is in the hands of a class so democratised that whilst still a class it represents itself to be the whole nation; when the only alternatives seem to be to talk to a coterie or to soliloquise, the difficulties of the poet and the necessity of criticism become greater.⁸

It is less the supposedly eternal questions invited by poetry than the problems posed by society which, for Eliot, determine the development of criticism: he insists, for example, that Wordsworth's statements on poetic diction were really animated by his social concerns. Briefly, his argument is 'that the development and change of poetry and of the criticism of it is due to elements which enter from outside'.⁹ Acceptance of this argument does away with the usual conception of criticism as a pre-given set of questions which reproduces itself under its own internal momentum; the importance of 'outside' factors can be recognized.

The very vocabulary of literary criticism, its constitutive metaphors, ought to be sufficient to betray the pressure of such outside factors. Two frames of reference in particular recur almost monotonously in critical discourse: the judicial or forensic, and the economic. 'Judgement' and 'evaluation' are the two terms most commonly resorted to by critics to define their task, and the clusters of metaphors which they

carry with them — of courts and tribunals, of value and debasement — are not at all arbitrary. They register real sources from which criticism derives, 'from outside', its status; real forces which impinge upon the production and reception of literary works.

In the first place the 'judgement' of literary works has a real extra-metaphorical equivalent in the fact that these works have always endured a degree of censorship and legal restraint upon their publication and dissemination. In casting themselves as 'judges' or as witnesses for the defence, critics habitually mimic the authority of more powerful assessors of literature. In some cases, indeed, opinions of a distinctly literary nature may become incorporated directly into forensic procedure: notable cases include Oscar Wilde's defence of his letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, from the dock at his sodomy trial, on the grounds that it was a 'prose poem',¹⁰ or Brecht's wrangles with the House Committee on Un-American Activities over the correct translation and meaning of his poems 'In Praise of Learning' and 'Forward, We've Not Forgotten'.¹¹ Still more impressive as an example of criticism's forensic figures coming true is the 'Lady Chatterley' trial (*Regina v. Penguin Books Limited*, 1960), a test case under the new Obscene Publications Act (1959) which required that expert witnesses be called to judge a book's literary merit. It was the long list of literary-critical 'expert witnesses' which persuaded the jury to acquit, while the prosecution found itself arguing on grounds associated with the literary-critical concept of the 'intentional fallacy'.¹²

Although its real effect was to relax censorship, under this law adverse pronouncements by literary critics can lead directly to the suppression of a literary work. These are of course very special cases, but they highlight a normally submerged component present in much critical discourse. Under normal circumstances the 'verdict' of criticism will have extra-legal consequences only, for example for the policy of publishing houses, but consequences which may be effectively identical. Despite the silence on this point in the theories and histories of criticism, there is no impassable gulf between censorship and criticism; the former may often be seen as a paradigm of the latter or, so to speak, its armed

wing. In this light, George Watson's assertion that criticism 'presupposes an open society'¹³ appears as an extremely doubtful piece of Cold War sophistry. For example, it would take considerable special pleading to demonstrate that the society in which Coleridge, not long before the Peterloo massacre, published his *Biographia Literaria* was a distinctly 'open' one; or that because of his compromises with Stalinism Georg Lukács was not a literary critic. Criticism from Plato onwards has, on the contrary, presupposed censorship, banishment, and official persecution in the very language of its 'judgements' and in its images of its own authority.

The second constitutive metaphor upon which criticism has drawn is more suitable to civil society than to the workings of state surveillance. The vocabulary of 'value' achieves particular prominence in criticism when critics become advisers to a class of literary consumers anxious to know the worth of their purchases. In this more or less free market of literary commodities, the staple critical genre becomes the book review, and its equivalent, the publisher's 'blurb' — again an area too sordid and worldly to have been treated by the theories and histories of criticism; it is not generally counted among T. S. Eliot's literary achievements, for example, that he was Faber's best 'blurb'-writer,¹⁴ nor could these texts be considered part of the Eliot canon under a critical orthodoxy in which advertising is considered untouchable. The literary vocabulary of value is, again, not an arbitrary figure of speech but the mark upon criticism of considerations which no book reviewer can altogether ignore, absorbed into criticism 'from outside'.

These observations are made to enforce the point that literary criticism is not a discourse born fully armed from the head of, say, Aristophanes or Plato, but a composite discourse. Even (indeed, especially) in those major deceptive instances — Dryden, Coleridge, Arnold, Eliot — where important critical figures have also been important poets, criticism does not derive from poetry, or even solely from the technical framework of rhetoric (itself, of course, contiguous with forensic and political traditions), but carries significantly more than just traces of other discourses, notably the economic, political, and judicial. It will be worth briefly reviewing

some instances. Plato, sometimes taken as the starting-point for Western criticism, presents almost an extreme confirmation of this view, his comments on poetry in *The Republic* leading up to his political decision in Book 10 to expel the poets from his ideal state. To turn to England, Dryden's status as 'Father' of English criticism owes much to his particular fusion of political and poetical interests into a new kind of critical outlook. Of his major critical work, *Of Dramatic Poesy: An Essay* (1668), Dryden wrote that its purpose was 'chiefly to vindicate the honour of our English writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them',¹⁵ and it is not by accident that its dialogues are set against the background noise of an English naval victory. Later critics of the 'neo-classical' period constantly play upon the contrast between the regularity insisted upon by post-Restoration taste and the barbarity both of literature and of politics in the Civil War and before. Later, Wordsworth's challenging of the special poetic diction encouraged by neo-classical tastes was itself informed partly by political motives; an attempt to 'democratize' the reading public's attitude to poetic language, in turn challenged by Coleridge's insistence upon a hierarchy of discourses and mental faculties.

The cases briefly noticed above should give some indication of the extent to which literary criticisms have incorporated 'from outside' various other elements, from patriotism to more elaborate political and social ideologies. A further development or exaggeration of this factor in the history of criticism, however, takes place when its use becomes conscious and deliberate, when critics conceive for themselves a social function more extensive than simply the defence of the national literary heritage against foreign competition. In English criticism, such a transformation is effected most decisively by the work of Matthew Arnold – to be examined in the next chapter. This work is itself partly informed by an important precedent which should be noted by way of introduction to the theme of criticism's social function in the modern English tradition: the writings of the French literary critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve.

Sainte-Beuve's critical work, in particular the enormous production represented in his *Causeries du lundi* (1849-69),