

Five Approaches of Literary Criticism

An Arrangement of Contemporary Critical Essays

WILBUR S. SCOTT

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On the moral approach

"In the twentieth century, the impulse toward moral evaluation has been expressed chiefly by writers labeled Neo-Humanist. Their chief interest lies in literature as a 'criticism' of life. The watchwords of Humanism are order, restraint, discipline."

On the psychological approach

"The application of psychological knowledge to art provides a more precise language with which to discuss the creative process. A second application goes back to the study of the lives of authors as a means of understanding their art. Third, psychology can be used to explain fictitious characters."

On the sociological approach

"The best sociological critics place the work of art in the social atmosphere and define that relationship. If too narrow an evaluation follows, this is likely to reveal the moral position of the critic, as much as the intrinsic merit of the work."

On the formalistic approach

"The most influential critical method of our time. It has commanded the zeal of most of our leading critics; has established its unofficial organ of journalism; is in fact, the method one almost automatically thinks of when speaking of contemporary criticism."

On the archetypal approach

"Whether done well or ill, the totemic [archetypal] approach obviously reflects the contemporary dissatisfaction with the scientific concept of man as, at his highest, rational."

THE FIRST PART OF THE HISTORY OF THE
REIGN OF KING CHARLES THE FIRST
BY JOHN BURNET

IN TWO VOLUMES

LONDON: Printed by J. Sturges, at the
Sign of the Sun in St. Dunstons Church
Lane, near St. Dunstons Church, in the
City of London, 1680.

IN TWO VOLUMES

THE SECOND PART OF THE HISTORY OF THE
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To my parents

Wilbur Stewart and Gertrude Haven Scott

To the Editors

W. H. H. and G. H. H.

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Argument

FIRST, IT SEEMS ADVISABLE to insist that the title of this book is deliberate: the organizational principle of the selection has to do with critical *approaches* rather than with critics. Without this distinction, the reader would rightly be outraged at the omission of essays by such writers as I. A. Richards, Lionel Trilling, Sir Herbert Read, Yvor Winters, and many others. But my choice has been determined chiefly by the desire to find clear examples, whoever the authors, of each of the five categories of modern criticism—Moral, Psychological, Sociological, Formalistic, and Archetypal.

It may seem that my arrangement represents too tidy a schematism. I should be forced to admit the validity of this charge, if I had proposed these five approaches as absolutely comprehensive. No; there are many good critical pieces which defy the compulsion to pigeonhole; and it is equally foolish to suppose that any critic deserving of continued attention will stay within the confines of a single approach. On the contrary, he is likely to employ that method—or better, those methods in combination—which best suit his knowledge, his particular critical sensitivities, and the work of art before him.

But I do maintain that, very broadly speaking, most of the critical efforts of our time lend themselves to the categories I have used here. For instance, Irving Babbitt, T. S. Eliot (in his later development) and Edmund Fuller have chosen to consider literature for its moral applications to humanity. Although this has always been of concern to critics and aestheticians (for example, Plato and Sir Philip Sidney), the twentieth century impulse to make this relationship reflects concern with the abandonment of Victorian values, and with the replacement of faith in some traditional code, by faith in science.

While the Humanists are trying to break away from the limitations of science, another group has been happy to use

the terms and insights of a new science, Psychology, as a means of interpreting literature. Thus Kenneth Burke has studied the poetic process as the poet's discovery of symbols to express his emotions, and as the arrangement of them to communicate his experience; Geoffrey Gorer has psychoanalyzed the author of *Pride and Prejudice*; Simon Lesser has examined the unconscious drives of two characters in modern fiction.

Another field developed in our time, Sociology, has modified the traditional historical research of scholars. By considering a work of art emphatically as a consequence of the social milieu, or as affecting it, a critical school has introduced a new tone of literary judgment. Joseph Wood Krutch relates the failure of modern tragedy to the quality of our modern temper, and George Orwell shows relationships between the art of Kipling and the intellectual atmosphere of his time. In the twenties and thirties especially, literary judgment was bound up with political and economic values. Caudwell's essay on Shaw is one of the best examples of the Marxist approach.

The most influential group has consisted of critics like James Smith, Olson, and Brooks, who have eschewed the relationship between art and aspects of society, history, or personal biography. They have concentrated on the structure, the *form* of literary pieces, examining with such scrupulosity as to seem scientific in their analyses.

A still more recent critical approach might be called archetypal. Its concern is with some human or social pattern unrelated to particular time, yet to be found in particular works of literature, as if the unconscious mind of the human race were partially the author. Gilbert Murray shows that both *Hamlet* and the Orestes story are instances of some basic plot of the son-mother relationship. Heilman treats *The Turn of the Screw* as a variant of the tale of the Garden of Eden. And Fiedler finds in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a surprising cultural pattern of the United States.

There are two other approaches unrepresented here, however. One concerns itself with the particular literary tradi-

tion behind the work of art; noting, for example, the place of Shakespeare's sonnets within the sonnet tradition; or the effect of the Petrarchan tradition upon the poems of Donne, and of these upon later writers. Such studies (characteristically the work of scholars with a leaning toward literary history rather than evaluation) are of great interest and value; but I agree with a general tendency to make a separation between them and essays in criticism.

A second approach also unrepresented is the impressionistic. Everyone has impressions in the face of literary experience, and many are compelled to record them. Their value depends, of course, upon the taste, knowledge, and writing ability of the critic. But by the very nature of the "type," such essays are either beyond grouping, or they fall into one or another of the categories used here.

In my teaching experience, I have concluded that the student who knows he has things to say about a work of literature, but has no direction by which to shape his perceptions, finds his problem solved by taking on the discipline and organization of one of the five approaches used here. If he does not wish to try his own hand at practical criticism, he will, I believe, find that his study of these essays and their groupings will unravel what often seems the maze of contemporary criticism.

In the introductions, I have tried to touch on three elements of each approach (though not necessarily in this order): its origins and development, its nature, and its limitations. My purpose has not been to write a scholarly treatise about each type, but, of course, I have aimed at accuracy. With each introduction, there is a bibliography. Once again, the intention was not to be comprehensive, but rather to suggest books and articles that further define the particular approach; that further illustrate the application of the approach; or that quarrel with the kind. With such references, the reader can go considerably further into each of the methods, according to his interests. Aside from the critical pieces themselves, the books which will be of greatest guidance, as they have been to me, are the following: Wellek and Warren,

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Theory of Literature, 1942; Stanley Hyman, *The Armed Vision*, 1948; Charles Glicksburg, *American Literary Criticism, 1900-1950*, 1951; William Van O'Connor, *An Age of Criticism, 1900-1950*, 1952; Floyd Stovall, editor, *The Development of American Literary Criticism*, 1955; David Daiches, *Critical Approaches to Literature*, 1956; J. P. Pritchard, *Criticism in America*, 1956; W. Y. Tindall, *Forces in Modern British Literature, 1885-1956* (Vintage Books edition), 1956; and Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism, A Short History*, 1957.

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