

CRITICAL
APPROACHES
TO
LITERATURE

DAVID DAICHES

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Introduction

TO ILLUMINATE both the nature of literature and the nature of criticism, this book presents some of the more important ways in which literature has been discussed. It is neither a history of criticism nor an annotated anthology of significant critical works. The critical pieces quoted and discussed represent examples of a method and a point of view—and their implications in both theory and practice.

The division into three parts is dictated by both logic and convenience. Part One considers how various critics have answered the question "What is the nature of imaginative literature, what is its use and value?" Part Two deals with the practical critic, and the different ways in which specific works of literary art have been and can be evaluated. Part Three takes up those fields of inquiry in which the literary critic touches other kinds of investigation, such as the psychological and the sociological, it inquires into the relationship between literary criticism and these other disciplines. True, many critics move freely from philosophic criticism to practical criticism, and the practical critic frequently advances and retreats around the area discussed in Part Three; further, a definition of the nature of poetry often has practical consequences in description and evaluation. There is bound to be some overlapping between the Parts—but the reader will have no difficulty in recognizing the different kinds of critical activity involved at any given point.

Many important critics are not discussed at all. Horace, Quintilian, Vida, Boileau, for instance, will not be found here, although each is important in the history of criticism. None of them, however, illustrates a method of approaching a literary work which is fundamentally different from that of some other critic who is discussed.

Where possible, I have taken my examples of methods and approaches from critics who wrote in English, to avoid the problems that inevitably arise when a critic's thought is translated. Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus had to be included because of the unique importance of the contribution of each, even though this has meant giving more than one key passage whose original meaning is problematical.

I have used individual critical essays to illustrate ways in which works of literature can be discussed, or points of view about the nature and value of works of literary art. The modern critical works quoted and discussed are not meant to represent a complete conspectus of modern criticism. Nor has it been my intention to give a full account of the thought of any individual critic—it has been no part of my aim to provide a full account of the philosophy of Plato or the history of the opinions of John Crowe Ransom. A passage cited might even be untypical of its author: the point in which I am interested is whether it represents a significant method or attitude, not whether it represents its author's total thought.

In short, my aim has been to provide an aid to the intelligent study of literary criticism, and of literature, of a kind that none of the standard histories or anthologies provide. *I am concerned with methodology, with the varying ways in which the art of literature and works of literature can be profitably discussed, I am not here concerned with critics as such or with the history of criticism as such.* If the "Kenyon school" is represented by more than one quotation and the "Chicago school" is not represented by any, the reason is that the former have provided some references more useful for my purpose than any that can be found among the writings of the latter. Perhaps I should add that I admire the brilliance and thoroughness of the "Chicago school" and I have not represented it in either Part One or Part Two only because I have found no convenient short piece of either philosophical or practical criticism among the works of this group—a group that has been primarily concerned with the analysis of the procedures of other critics. To some of these analyses the reader is referred in the course of the discussion.

The sections that are set off at the ends of the chapters in the second and third Parts provide suggestions for development and adaptation. I am trying to suggest the kind of thing the reader might profitably work on, and to show the practical relevance of the theoretical positions discussed in the text. I am convinced that it is more helpful to

the reader—whatever his purpose and method in using them—to have a variety of suggestions of this kind, which can be adapted and expanded at will, than to have predigested questions for which much of the answer is implied in the way the question is put. To ask the right questions is as much a test of critical maturity as to give the right answers. These appendices are offered both as aids to asking the pertinent questions and as encouragement in finding the answers.

Clear conceptions concerning the different things the literary critic can do and has done seem to me the primary requisite for a serious interest in literary criticism. It is little use stuffing one's head with ideas of what this critic said or that critic believed if one cannot see clearly in what area of critical activity each critic is operating. Or, to put it another way, it is no use learning a series of answers if one does not know what the questions were.

What kinds of question can the literary critic ask? We must surely know this before we can profitably discuss his answers. We must know, too, what kinds of answer can be given before we can begin to compare one critic's answers with another's. This book's purpose is to help the reader obtain this sort of information: its primary object is clarification. Lest any reader imagine that I expect too much from this or any other kind of literary criticism, he is advised to turn to the *Epilogue* before, rather than after, he has gone through the book.

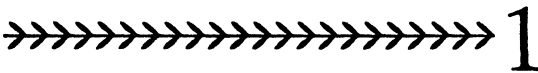
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PART ONE

The Philosophical Inquiry

The Platonic dilemma



LITERARY CRITICISM concerns itself with any of several questions. It can ask the philosophical question concerning the nature of imaginative literature, and in a logical sense this question should precede all others—for how can we discuss anything at all unless we know in the first place what we are talking about? Yet inquirers have often asked other questions about literature before they have defined its nature, and asked them profitably, too, for the road to understanding does not always follow the most obvious logical route.

The major critical questions

We can ask what literature *does*, which is to define it in terms of its function and at the same time to suggest its value. We can ask norma-

tive rather than descriptive questions, seeking to discover how to distinguish the good from the less good and the bad among literary works. And in the realm of description we can develop all kinds of special techniques of demonstration and analysis in such a way as to include or imply a value judgment. We may tackle the psychological problem of how the literary mind operates in creation. Finally, criticism may ask no questions at all, but simply seek to increase appreciation on the reader's part by any one of a great variety of methods, ranging from objective demonstration of certain qualities to impressionistic (or even autobiographical) revelation of how the work affects the critic. The critic's activity may thus be ontological, functional, normative, descriptive, psychological, or appreciative. Each of these activities has its place and its usefulness, and the many questions involved can be and have been asked in many different ways.

The philosophical inquiry into the nature of literature—what are its distinguishing features? how does it differ from other kinds of discourse?—has been going on in the Western world for well over two thousand years, and it continues today as actively as ever. This is the kind of question each generation prefers to answer in its own way, for literature is a complex phenomenon, different aspects of which are seen and emphasized by different ages. Yet, though the answers differ from age to age, there are family resemblances among groups of answers, and it is not difficult to make some general classifications among them. Further, some answers, however much bound up with the problems of a particular literature in a particular time, have been especially germinal, later critics have accepted them or re-interpreted them or built on them or made use of them in some other way. Perhaps the most fruitful of all critical discussions devoted to inquiry into the nature and value of imaginative literature has been the *Poetics* of Aristotle, written in the fourth century before the birth of Christ—and, as we have it, an incomplete and fragmentary work—but still basic to any discussion of the question. Aristotle's definition of literature brings out its special, differentiating qualities, demonstrates its function and assesses value in terms of that function, and vindicates it against those who consider it useless or immoral.

Literature, as we are here using the term, refers to any kind of composition in prose or verse which has for its purpose not the communication of fact but the telling of a story (either wholly invented or given new life, through invention) or the giving of pleasure

through some use of the inventive imagination in the employment of words. This is not, of course, a definition of literature, for to give one at this stage would be to anticipate the whole argument of this book, but simply an indication of how the term is being used. There is, oddly enough, no single word in English that corresponds to the Greek *poesis* or the German *Dichtung*, terms which refer to products of the literary imagination and do not include, as the term *literature* does, anything at all that is written. The term *poetry* as used by some earlier writers—by Sir Philip Sidney, for example, in his *Apologie for Poetrie*—has the wider meaning of *poesis* or *Dichtung*, but it has since narrowed in meaning, just as *literature* has become too wide. Thus it is impossible to translate the title of Goethe's great work *Dichtung und Wahrheit* into English simply and neatly: it does not mean "Poetry and Truth," but rather "Imaginative Writing and Truth" or perhaps even (if one must do it in three words) "Fiction and Fact."

Poetry and the moralists

The use of language for other purposes than to communicate literal truth was bound to come under suspicion as soon as moral ideas were organized and philosophic systems developed. At an earlier stage in civilization the distinction between poetic and literal truth is often blurred, since all discourse in language is conducted through a kind of spontaneous symbolism, all statement is metaphorical, and the imagination is always on hand to describe and interpret the real world. That is what Shelley meant when, in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), he claimed that "in the youth of the world" all discourse was in a sense poetry. "Their (primitive men's) language is vitally metaphorical, that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts, and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse."

The kind of naive poetry that Shelley was talking about was not consciously distinguished from other uses of language. As soon as poetry became self-conscious it became suspect. If poetry does not

tell the truth, is it not immoral, or at best useless? It is perhaps strange that the idea that the poetic imagination may reveal profound truths of its own was nothing new or startling to man in a very primitive state of civilization and that as civilization advanced this awareness disappeared and had to be rediscovered by the conscious effort of critics. The vindication of the poetic imagination—which needed no vindication for primitive man—thus became one of the most important functions of literary critics in a self-conscious civilization.

The poet as divinely inspired

An obvious way of achieving this vindication was to differentiate sharply between imaginative literature (or poetry, in Sidney's sense) and all other forms of discourse. The poet was a possessed creature, not using language in the way that normal human beings do, but speaking in a divinely inspired frenzy. Such a view removed the poet from ordinary canons of judgment, and made him something between a prophet and a madman—sometimes one, sometimes the other, and sometimes both. There was, of course, a very primitive element in this view—the prophet working himself up into a frenzy before becoming possessed and delivering the word of God is a common enough notion in early stages of civilization—but nevertheless the view could be developed with deliberate sophistication in order to put the poet beyond the reach of philosophic censure. Plato suggests this view in a passage in his *Phaedrus*¹

The third kind is the madness of those who are possessed by the Muses, this enters into a delicate and virgin soul, and there inspiring frenzy, awakens lyrical and all other numbers, with these adorning the myriad actions of ancient heroes for the instruction of posterity. But he who, having no touch of the Muses' madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art—he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted, the sane man is nowhere at all when he enters into rivalry with the madman.

Plato develops this view at greater length in his *Ion*, in which the poet is presented as the inspired rhapsodist through whom God

¹ The quotations from Plato are Jowett's translation, with some minor alterations.

speaks, a man lacking art and volition of his own, a passive vehicle merely. In this dialogue, Socrates is speaking to Ion

The gift which you possess is not an art, but, as I was just saying, an inspiration, there is a divinity moving you, like that contained in the stone which Euripides calls a magnet, but which is commonly known as the stone of Heraclea. This stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a similar power of attracting other rings, and sometimes you may see a number of pieces of iron and rings suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone. In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself, and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration from them. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Corybantian revellers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains but when falling under the power of music and metre they are inspired and possessed, like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus, but not when they are in their right mind. And the soul of the lyric poet does the same, as they themselves say, for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dens of the Muses, winging their way there from flower to flower like the bees. And this is true. For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him. When he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles. Many are the noble words in which poets speak concerning the actions of men, but like yourself when speaking about Homer, they do not speak of them by any rules of art—they are simply inspired to utter that to which the Muse impels them, and that only, and when inspired, one of them will make dithyrambs, another hymns of praise, another choral strains, another epic or iambic verses—and he who is good at one is not good at any other kind of verse for not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine. Had he learned by rules of art, he would have known how to speak not of one theme only, but of all, and therefore God takes away the minds of poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that God himself is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us. And Tynnichus the Chalcidian affords a striking instance of what I am saying—he wrote nothing that anyone would care to remember but the famous paean which is in every one's mouth,

one of the finest poems ever written, simply an invention of the Muses, as he himself says For in this way the God would seem to indicate to us and not allow us to doubt that these beautiful poems are not human, or the work of man, but divine and the work of God and that the poets are only the interpreters of the Gods by whom they are severally possessed Was not this the lesson which the God intended to teach when by the mouth of the worst of poets he sang the best of songs?

Ion is a rhapsodist who recites and embellishes the works of the great poets The poet is inspired by the God, and the rhapsodist is inspired by the poet, and so the magnetic chain develops There is a certain amount of irony in the way Socrates makes Ion admit that he is not in his right mind when he recites and interprets Homer "Are you not carried out of yourself, and does not your soul in an ecstasy seem to be among the persons or places of which she is speaking, whether they are in Ithaca or in Troy or whatever may be the scene of the poem?" And Ion replies, "That proof strikes home to me, Socrates For I must confess that at the tale of pity my eyes are filled with tears, and when I speak of horrors, my hair stands on end and my heart throbs" "Well, Ion," Socrates replies, "and what are we to say of a man who at a sacrifice or festival, when he is dressed in holiday attire, and has gold crowns upon his head, of which nobody has robbed him, appears weeping or panic-stricken in the presence of more than twenty thousand friendly faces, when there is no one spoiling or wronging him,—is he in his right mind or is he not?" "No indeed, Socrates," Ion has to concede, "I must say that strictly speaking he is not his right mind" Socrates then points out that Ion's performance produces a similar effect on the spectators, who thus also become inspired

Do you know that the spectator is the last of the rings which, as I am saying, derive their power from the original magnet, and the rhapsode like yourself and the actors are intermediate links, and the poet himself is the first link of all? And through all these the God sways the soul of men in any direction which he pleases, and makes one man hang down from another There is also a chain of dancers and masters and under-masters of bands, who are suspended at the side, and are the rings which hang from the Muse And every poet has a Muse from whom he is suspended, and by whom he is said to be possessed, which is nearly the same thing, for he is taken possession of

Socrates then discusses whether the inspired reciter and interpreter of the poets can judge better of any given matter treated by the poet than the expert in that subject can (for example, can the rhapsodist or the general judge more effectively whether Homer correctly presents the art of war?) and after confusing poor Ion badly on this subject (and no wonder, for in putting the question thus, Socrates begs the fundamental question concerning the difference between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*, between poetry and science) forces him to choose between accepting the charge of dishonesty or admitting that he knows nothing himself but recites and interprets through a process of inspiration

The *Ion* is the most elaborate presentation in the ancient world of the notion of poetry as pure inspiration—a notion which has had a long history, has gone through many modifications, and which survives today “Great wits are sure to madness near allid,” wrote Dryden in his *Absalom and Achitophel* two thousand years later, and nearly a hundred years before Dryden Shakespeare had noted that

The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact

It is possible, of course, that Plato wrote the *Ion* as well as the passage in the *Phaedrus* with his tongue in his cheek. Certainly, the view of poetry he presented in Book X of the *Republic* is very different, though this fact does not mean much, for a philosopher, like anybody else, has a perfect right to change his mind. But the note of irony which is sustained throughout the *Ion* and the way in which Socrates makes a fool out of Ion suggests that Plato was emphasizing the difference between the poet and the philosopher, wholly to the advantage of the latter. Further meditation of this distinction may well have led him to the position he maintains in the *Republic*.

It is significant that the theory of inspiration which Plato presents in the *Ion* says nothing about the poet's lying—he is speaking divine truths, but Plato does not go on to say that divine truths may sometimes appear to the ordinary human mind as literal untruths. The *Ion* assumes, indeed, that what the poet speaks of is the true and the beautiful, so that we can hardly say that Plato takes refuge in the theory of inspiration in order to vindicate the poet against the charge