

NEW LAMPS FOR OLD

Modern Critical Methods and the Teaching of English

By JOHN PETER

MODERATION is the oldest of the virtues, and the crowd before her shrine has many more professors in it than are gathered here this morning. Occasionally we may wonder whether '*aurea mediocritas*', the legend on the shrine, is simply 'priceless mediocrity' dignified by an old language, but as a profession it is to her, and to her sister-goddess Detachment, that we doff our mortar-boards: both them we serve, and of their train are we. Zeal, and her priestess Trenchancy, on the other hand, we recognize as painted baggages, unworthy of our deference; but we have to admit that, like Salome and Miss Sally Rand, they keep the audience awake. In our work, in lectures especially, we have to please all these mistresses and we all know what a difficult job it is. It is our aim to present moderate views in a zealous and stimulating way; it is our fate, in examination scripts, to get back frenzied views expressed with an accuracy that it would be charitable to call moderate. Ours, as I once heard Professor Dover Wilson remark, is the plight of Macbeth—'that we but teach Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return to plague the 'inventor.' If in what follows I am again guilty of yoking these antipathetic goddesses, Moderation and Zeal, by violence together I do so with my eyes open, and in the hope that an audience like this, already familiar with their quarrels, will look on my guilt with the sympathy of fellow-delinquents, old lags who have done time for the same trespass many times themselves. To those who believe (as I do) that a short paper like this should be provocative I apologise for any diplomacy that may be detected in what I say. To those who give their attention freely, without its having to be solicited, I apologise for any signs of impetuosity or the partisan.

In trying to speak briefly about modern critical methods and their use in the teaching of English the first problem is to distinguish between different methods and to determine their comparative claims. From the long list of modern critics I would select three who, as much for their influence as for their intelligence, deserve to be mentioned here: I mean I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot and William Empson. Of these three posterity may well consider Richards the most important, and perhaps many of us here today would argue for his pre-eminence. But I think

that in this context, when we are speaking about the *teaching* of English, he has to be summarily dismissed. The tendency of his work is, on the whole, theoretical—he writes, that is to say, primarily as a psychologist and aesthete—and, though it goes without saying that a teacher will gain from familiarity with his work, it is difficult to argue that his books are as immediately and positively useful as those of some other critics. With some temerity, then, and in the knowledge that he will pop up again more than once, I set him on one side.

Empson, one of Richard's students and, like him, very much concerned with the multiple meanings and connotations of language, is nevertheless a different sort of critic; and I think his tremendous influence in this continent is easy to understand and not too difficult to justify. A certain kind of problem-student, the stolid pragmatist who reads poetry as if he were reading the 'For Sale' columns in a newspaper, and who wants to know the value of a liberal education in dollars and cents, is far commoner here than in other parts of the world, and the problem of how to penetrate his indifference is much more insistent. For this sort of student one can prescribe Empson with the confidence of a physician prescribing a wonder-drug, and usually with comparable results. Language, which he had always considered much like algebra (only easier), begins to veil its austerity in a nimbus of suggestion, words gradually take on a richness which he had never suspected, and in time poetry may even become bearable to him—at any rate in small doses. In a society as avid as ours for sheer information, and as intolerant of any values other than mercantile ones, the broadening and balancing of such a student's mind is a real achievement, and it is understandable that in America the so-called *New Criticism* should have taken up Empson's methods with enthusiasm and assiduity. But the hunt for ambiguities and overtones has its dangers, and in my opinion they are grave ones. In the first place, though there is a great deal of poetry that can be dealt with in this way, there are many good poems—especially in the eighteenth century—where the method becomes forced and unconvincing. Again, it is essentially a rather facile approach. Once the general procedure has been learned (and it is easy enough to learn) to apply it in fresh cases requires no great effort, and the individual challenge of a new subject is sunk in routine. Already, I think, there are signs that the N.E.D. is becoming just as indispensable to the critic as to the textual scholar, and in a way that it is far less easy to defend. We now

have the critic digging up all the significations of the words in a poem in order to prove that the poem itself evinces a rich complexity; and in this way the whole approach is degenerating into something painstakingly mechanical, something shallow and adventitious as well. When experienced critics are as prone as this to take the line of least resistance can we expect our students, under their guidance, to be scrupulous or sensitive? I don't see how we can.

At the risk of sounding like Oscar Wilde, however—or of being waylaid, like Dryden, on a dark night—my real objection to the New Criticism would be that it isn't, properly speaking, criticism at all. Some other designation—like the New Exegesis, or the New Analysis (if it must be 'New')—would be much more appropriate. For criticism, though it implies analysis and attentive reading, implies *judgment* also; and judgment, meticulous and responsible evaluation, is something which, it seems to me, the 'new critic' almost deliberately avoids. Take something like the analysis of James Stephens' poem, 'The Main-Deep,' in Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. Without question the analysis is perceptive, but isn't it always something of a shock, when one has finished reading it, to turn back to the comparative triviality of the poem? That this sort of commentary can be very useful when we are dealing with insensitive students I have already admitted; but with our better students, and even the 'low B's', we need to feel much less complacent about it. Empson has himself lately admitted that 'to be analysable doesn't make a bit of language good'; but he makes the admission in a footnote, and in small print. Yet surely it is vital. The mere act of developing a careful commentary on a particular poem, and developing it at some length, is enough to confer on that poem, in the student's eyes, a high degree of eminence, and if these implicit suggestions of esteem are not corrected, or given a properly qualifying context, the student's own judgment, far from being refined and disciplined, soon grows debased. He comes in time to make no finer distinctions at all, but to divide the whole of literature into two primitive categories, the good and the bad—and his reasons for consigning a particular work to the one or the other category are often hopelessly vague, and subjective to the point of paranoia. I am not, of course, contending that Brooks and Warren are themselves guilty of this sort of crudity. I'm not suggesting that they really think Stephens's poem as fine an achievement as (shall we say?) the 'Ode To A Nightingale'. But their method allows

them to leave a student with the impression that they *do* feel like this, and to that extent it seems to me hazardous. Students nourished on this sort of exegesis, I think, are like patients from whose diet an essential vitamin has been excluded. The disciplinary effects of criticism—the effects in virtue of which it becomes an education rather than a display of ingenuity—are, as it were, withheld from them, and in time a sort of beri-beri of irresponsibility becomes almost inevitable. For, when once you are wholeheartedly set on the unravelling of ambiguity, judgment and a sense of relevance—common sense we might even say—are the only possible restraints that there can be upon you not to go too far. Empson's own excesses are well-known, and many of us, I feel sure, must have had occasion, from time to time, to check our own students from pressing their analysis beyond the critical point at which it ceases to be illuminating and becomes ridiculous instead. Eliot has aptly said that criticism is not an 'autotelic activity', but one that depends for its validity on relations outside itself—with the thing criticised, and with the audience addressed. One of the great dangers of Empsonian analysis is that it tends to make criticism autotelic, a ceremonious spinning out from within oneself of a cocoon of threads which are not only opaque but ineluctable. Blind and trapped in its own web, intent upon its own productiveness, the spider spins madly on and on. The best we can hope is that it eventually strangles in its own meshes.

I have left T. S. Eliot to be discussed last, and you will be thinking that I have done so because, like the cherry, he is the most satisfying item on my plate. This may be true, but it is only a part of the truth. Eliot seems to me an erratic critic, one whose judgments are often based on personal, even private, interests—I would instance here the essays on Tourneur and *Hamlet*, and his more recent praise of Djuna Barne's novel, *Nightwood*—and his aberrations seem to me all the more serious for being difficult to detect. From a writer so preoccupied with 'impersonality' we expect a rather icy disinterestedness, and his careful prose often leads us to believe that he is disinterested, even when he is nothing of the kind. Covert prejudices seem to me to impair a good deal of his criticism, but in spite of that I should nevertheless place him far above a critic like Empson—simply because he has a far more comprehensive and responsible conception of what criticism should be. 'The rudiment of criticism,' he says himself, 'is the ability to select a good poem and reject a bad poem.' I don't see how such a statement can

be controverted—whatever else a critic may be able to do *that*, surely, is basic, the specific index of his capacity—and yet, as I say, it is just this ‘rudiment’ that the New Criticism neglects. Eliot himself has not neglected it, and it is one of his merits as a critic that he has not been pusillanimous about making value-judgments. It is still more to his credit that his best practice should have shown how much of the critic’s make-up—intelligence, sensibility, even wisdom—should be involved in any value-judgment that he does make. Unlike so many modern critics he does not bring to literature a limited, *a priori*, formal interest—in texture, structure, symbolism or what not. Instead he brings perspicacity and sensitiveness, and the fastidious sense of what good literature really is which no theoretical approach can ever replace. Again, though he *did* write a thesis for Harvard on F. H. Bradley, his approach is not consciously philosophical, and he is not hedged in by the bounds of a general aesthetic position in the same way that Richards sometimes is—as in *Coleridge on Imagination*, for instance. At his best, in fact, he has the Johnsonian virtue of seeing literature as something inseparable from, and vital to, the allegedly ‘ordinary’ business of living. Literature is not for him, as it seems to be for Richards, a rather academic problem in noetics; nor is it, as with the depressing majority, simply a pretext for figure-skating.

These may seem to you large claims to be making for Eliot’s criticism, and perhaps they are. But I have to admit that I see him, as I see Empson, not simply as one critic but as a critical mode—and, more particularly, as an influence on others. It is when I consider the younger critics who, in their own way, have preserved and developed Eliot’s type of criticism that my estimate of his work seems to take on, in my own eyes at least, a less debatable force. If any group of critics can be considered the heirs to Eliot’s critical estate—his earlier and less conformist work especially—I suppose the contributors to the quarterly *Scrutiny* have the major claim; and it is in *Scrutiny*’s pages, a body of work accumulated during a period of twenty years, that I find a conclusive argument for the stimulation and fertility of his own writings. Of course it is true that the contributors to *Scrutiny* have been made and varied. Auden, the general editor of *Essays in Criticism*, Empson himself, Richards himself, George Santayana, R. H. Tawney, F. R. Leavis, Professor Butterfield, Q. D. Leavis, Sir Herbert Grierson, Professor Harding, Dr. Bradbook, the head of the London School of Economics, Professor Knights—it would be a bold

spirit who set out to reduce a list that included those names, especially when Americans like Quentin Anderson and Rene Wellek have to be added to it, to simple uniformity. But it has been the deliberate policy of *Scrutiny*, over the years, through all the variety of its contributors, to maintain the judicial 'rudiment of criticism, to discriminate as well as to analyse; and to this extent, at any rate, its contents have been much less of a gallimaufry than the names I have just given might suggest.

You'll notice that I say 'to discriminate as well as to analyse.' *Scrutiny's* criticism has been much more comprehensive than Empson's sort of exegesis. For all their concern with judgment, the scrutineers cannot be accused of neglecting analysis; and indeed, for the best account of what analysis can be I should turn, not to Empson, but to Dr. Leavis's *Education and the University*. 'Analysis,' he says, 'is not a dissection of something that is already and passively there. What we call analysis is, of course, a constructive or creative process. It is a more deliberate following-through of that process of creation in response to the poet's words which reading is. It is a re-creation in which, by a considering attentiveness, we ensure a more than ordinary faithfulness and completeness.' A passage like that, backed as it is by the great number of sensitive analyses that have appeared in *Scrutiny*, puts Empson's case as well as anything he has himself written. But it is significant that Dr. Leavis does not stop short there. He goes on almost at once to say that a 'sense of relevance' is indispensable, and that analysis must be 'controlled by an implicit concern for a total value-judgment.' Here, it seems to me, is the whole difference between the two approaches. Empson and the New Critics, taking them by and large, have hypostatized analysis, have allowed it to become an end in itself. The scrutineers, on the other hand, taking *them* by and large, have tried to keep its status as a *means* continually before them; and, in doing so, have generally managed to keep their analyses pertinent and controlled. If I turn the page in *Education and the University* I come to an analysis of Arnold's sonnet, *To Shakespeare*. After noting the general impression left by the sonnet, and having pointed out that there is in it a certain stiffness, a lack-lustre and rather hackneyed propriety, the critic goes on to examine it more closely, to see whether there is any tangible evidence that Arnold is not here writing at his full stretch. Pretty soon we are concentrating on the main image in the poem, 'the loftiest hill . . . Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea . . .' And here I can allow Dr. Leavis to speak

in his own words. 'The trope of a hill's *planting its feet* in the sea,' he says, 'would have passed: it is sanctioned currency, and in suggestion (such as it has) it is static. But *footsteps* (that is, the action of *walking*) . . . introduces a ludicrous suggestion of gigantic, ponderously wading strides.' To quote more, especially when one is trying to be brief, is, I think, unnecessary. Of course the analysis proceeds—with as much in the way of conclusiveness as, it seems to me, in its very nature, a piece of criticism is ever likely to possess. But already an irrefutable point has been made, a point that has the integrity of *fact*, and yet a point that engages the faculty for judgment in every one of us. I said earlier that when we turned back to Stephens's poem, after Brooks and Warren's commentary on it, the experience was always a slight shock. The carpet-seller had, as it were, kept us so engrossed in the weave that we had failed to notice how uselessly small the carpet actually was. After the analysis of Arnold's sonnet it is with a very different feeling that one returns to it—the feeling almost of seeing it distinctly for the first time. In this case, indeed, it is as though a companion had pointed out to us a number of bad burns in the carpet which, thanks to the poor light and our own astigmatism, we had not observed. I feel that Arnold himself would have been the first to salute a critic so evidently concerned for the standards that he spent his life in fostering.

'Well,' some of you may say, 'this is all very well, but it is uncomfortably close to Zeal and Trenchancy, and we are for Moderation. You yourself admit that Eliot's judgments are often off-centre. Aren't they therefore dangerous? And anyway are our students mature enough to be confronted with any judgments apart from the conventional established ones?'

To begin with, I should of course quite readily agree that the best critic is liable at times to make wrong judgments—you remember Johnson on *Lycidas*—but I think that, when we make this sort of admission, we ought to remember that there are different degrees of 'wrongness', and almost different kinds. We all have our particular likes and dislikes in literature—I myself, for instance, read Gray with very little pleasure, and have an almost idolatrous regard for Marvell—and when a critic's judgments run counter to these we are all too apt to tell ourselves that he is 'wrong.' You remember E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, telling his audience that probably they liked Scott for the same reason that he liked *The Swiss Family Robinson*: because the Waverley Novels

were muddled up with pleasant memories of childhood in their minds, and winter evenings round the fire. We all have these personal preferences. If we say we haven't we're only being dishonest with ourselves. But having them is a very different thing from impugning a critic's disinterested judgments; and to say that he is 'wrong' because he does not share our predilections is simply arrogance and conceit. Richards draws a very useful distinction between 'personal' and 'normative' judgments—judgments which express our own tastes only, and judgments which are valid in a much more general and objective sense. I think we have to be very careful, when we say that a critic is 'wrong', that we are not merely setting his normative judgment against our personal taste—just as we have to be careful, when we ourselves write criticism, that it *is* criticism we are writing, and not autobiography. A critic has, of course, only his own reactions to go on: his judgments must always be 'personal' in a certain sense. But idiosyncratic they should not be; and we too should avoid idiosyncrasy in considering them.

Even if a critic's judgments *are* idiosyncratic, however, even if we feel (as I feel about some of Eliot's valuations) that they ought not to be accepted as normative, I don't see that they should alarm us, or that we should try to steer our students away from them. Indeed it is surely best that, like Sex or any other tricky subject, these things should be discussed openly and sensibly, so that we ourselves can help the student to see them in, perhaps, a clearer light. A judgment need not, in fact, persuade: it is enough that it challenges. And *any* judgment, even a wrong one, gives much greater scope for education, for the training of the mind and the refining of the sensibility, than a non-committal blank can ever do. Most of our students, let us quite honestly admit, will never be scholars. The discipline and adjustment that research can give is beyond them, and to demand premature scholarship from them is to enjoin upon them only the decorous inutilities of drudgery and memory-work. What we need to do is to bring literature to life for them, to use it to develop that general capacity for discrimination, intelligence and decision which, however imperfectly, every one of them has got. By inviting them to approach each new author, not in a spirit of empty deference, but critically, independently, and with as much in the way of sensitiveness and maturity as they can presently muster, we can touch the very quick and centre of their individual personalities. Instead of fobbing them off with facts alone, we go to work upon their intelligence and

opinions, teaching them to use their intelligence in the determining of their opinions. And, however meagre the results may sometimes be, we have at least the satisfaction of knowing that we have not avoided our responsibilities, but tried to meet them.

Scrutiny's sort of criticism is so close to the view of education that I have been hurriedly sketching that I believe, if that view itself is accepted, then *Scrutiny* must be accepted too—much more frequently used than, I think, at the present time, we do use it. I am not of course throwing Eliot's *Selected Essays* out of the window. But no single critic, however gifted, can have the range of a quarterly—and for teacher and student alike the range of the critics they choose to consult is important. Let us by all means be prepared to disagree with what we read in *Scrutiny*, provided only that we disagree rationally and not in the reflex of prejudice. But let us remember also that this is the traditional and proven mode of English criticism—and that we should not, because we disagreed with them here and there, condemn as pernicious or useless Dryden, or Johnson, or Coleridge, or Arnold. It seems to me that today there are voices on all sides, from all sorts of critics, soliciting us to abandon this traditional sort of criticism, and to take up with something fresher and brighter. 'New lamps for old! New lamps for old!'—we hear it wherever we go. It isn't a respect for fairy-tales that compels me to point out that we might be much better advised to stick to the lamp we have got.