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A HISTORY AND STUDY OF THE CRITICAL ESSAY

By

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A Thesis submitted partially to fulfill the requirements for
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A HISTORY AND STUDY OF THE CRITICAL ESSAY

The Essay as a form in literary practice found its origin in the sixteenth century in the writings of Michel Montaigne. As Montaigne used it, the essay was a personal, chatty, intimate discourse between the author and the reader. John Richard Green described it very nicely when he wrote that "the essayist (Montaigne) is a gentleman who chats to a world of gentlemen and whose chat is shaped and coloured by a sense of what he owes to his company and what he owes to his subject." This while it characterizes the essay of Montaigne, hardly covers the scope of the essay as it appears in English Literature. We might rather accept the definition that the essay is "an attempt, within certain limits, to elucidate the most important facts and thoughts concerning a chosen subject, and to place these thoughts in an attractive shape and a clear light before the reader ! Perceived in this light, the essay is usually neither comprehensive in time nor exhaustive in treatment. It is, rather, a view of some phase of the subject with the style of thought and treatment dependent upon both the mood and the angle of vision of the writer. It is the opportunity of the reader to look upon a subject "through the eye-glass of the genius."

The essay then, is the form of expression, as the name implies, of the critical essayist. But though

the essay, and perforce, the critical essay, is of comparatively modern origin and practise, literary criticism has existed almost as long as literature. The recognition that each branch of literature has it's own purpose and, that though pleasure is the chief aim of all literature, nevertheless each branch has it's own peculiar pleasure can be found in the writings of Aristotle. Moreover, Aristotle maintained that this recognition must be a basis for criticism and that criticism itself; was a "Standard for judging well." In the Poetics we find his famous description or definition of tragedy which has been upheld till the present time and forms the basis for our modern dramatic criticism. Longinus, who lived in the early Christian era, wrote that criticism was the search after the principle or quality which gave enjoyment. He maintained that literature had but one end, pleasure, and that on this basis were all critical judgments to be formed. From the time, then, of Aristotle and Longinus the practise of judging literary works according to their merit and demerit can be traced through all the languages which have embraced a great national literature.

With the work of literary criticism so vast in time and extent, it is only natural that varied manners and methods of criticism should be developed. And to overlook these different methods and phases of literary

criticism in a study of the critical essay would be a fatal lack of foresight and put us much in the position of the unhappy Mr. Winkle, who, having insisted on going hunting, discovered that handling a gun was an essential feature.

One of the outstanding methods of literary criticism is the one which is called judicial criticism. It consists in the judgment of a work of literature according to generally recognized and acknowledged rules and standards. It should be a more or less honest attempt on the part of the critic to evaluate the production according to its merits; to appraise it and tell its worth. Too few of the men who have used this method have realized that it requires a writer of wide learning and erudition. No one can view a work in relation to other works on the same subject without having a deep knowledge both of the subject and all the productions on the subject.

In contra-distinction to this method is that one which has been named the inductive method. The critic who uses this method as a basis for his criticism does not evaluate the work. He passes no judgment upon the material and workmanship; he merely examines it and describes its contents as he views them.

the art and I had almost called these the two most important methods of criticism, but there is a third manner, which from its great extent and ^{much} many advocated can not be overlooked. It is called the impressionistic school of criticism. It deals with the impressions a work in literature leaves with the reader and rests its case upon the motto "De gustibus, non disputandum est." The advocate of this method of criticism will speak somewhat in this manner: Each one of us, if we are sensitive to impressions and express ourselves well, will produce a new work of art to replace the one which gave us our sensations. That is the art of criticism and beyond that, criticism cannot go." Nor are these merely arbitrary divisions which can hardly be observed in the writings of the critics and had no place whatever in their thoughts on the subject. John Dryden calls criticism a standard of judgment whose purpose is to enable us to observe those excellencies which should delight a reasonable reader. M. Taine, however, would have criticism the determination of the productions of a given period according to dominant characteristics such as race, the influence of heredity and environment, the political, social and physical circumstances of the life of the author. Stedman, again, calls criticism nearest approach to it is the "Defense of Poesy", written

the art and practise of declaring in what degree any work, character or action conforms to the right, while Anatole France described the critic, not as a judge imposing sentence but rather as a sensitive soul describing its adventures among masterpieces.

But though these are thoughts of the critics on their craft and the divisions they themselves have laid down, there are yet other critics who well merit the cry of Goethe "kill the dog; he is a reviewer." In this category come those who use no method nor combination of methods and disdain any well-organized system of criticism. Here is the critic who uses his subject as a platform to show his knowledge, his wit, his natural ability; to show his style, his facility in coining epigrams; in giving phrases new and strange twists of language or to display his erudition on some fourth cousin of the subject.

At this juncture the reader might, and not without reason, ask whither we are going with our study of the critical essay but the answer is simple. These are the results, the crystallized principles of centuries of literary criticism and are brought to their greatest degree of strength and beauty in the critical essay.

We can find no examples of the critical essay in English literature before the seventeenth century. The nearest approach to it is the "Defence of Poesy", written

by Sir Philip Sidney in 1579. It is an eloquent appeal for imaginative literature in the form of verse and though critical in parts, its form hardly warrants us in classing it as a critical essay. Indeed, this same truth becomes very apparent even in a study of the critical literature of the seventeenth century. Thus Ben Jonson, the dictator of Belles Lettres in England during the first half of the seventeenth century was a great critic, but he was not a master of the critical essay. With his criticisms scattered through his miscellaneous works his position as a critic is spoken of by Rymer who says that "till lately England was as free from Critics as from wolves; Ben Jonson having all the critical learning to himself." As an example of his criticism we have the famous incident where Jonson relates that some strolling player mentioned, as a point of honor, that Shakespeare never blotted a line; where-upon Jonson answered "Would that he had blotted a thousand," and went on to explain and give his reasons. That this is literary criticism, and of a high order, no one will deny; neither can they affirm that it is the critical essay.

But even though the critical essay had not yet reached such great popularity in this period, there were some writers who can be classed as critical essayists.

"the neighing of a horse or the howling of a mastiff possesses more meaning" than Shakespeare's verse.

Foremost among these stands John Dryden, one of the chief figures in the literature of the time. Among all his critical writings perhaps the best known is the "Essay on Dramatic Poesy." In this work was the rebirth of English critical literature, performed in a time when Dryden was, as he says "seeking my way in a vast ocean of criticism without other help than the pole-star of the ancients and the rules of the French stage among the moderns." His Prefaces, while not so well-known conform more closely to the formal critical essay. They are honest, candid, straight-forward talks with the reader, given in a clear, forceful, vigorous style and seek to bring to the attention of the readers the excellencies of the work.

In direct antithesis to the critical essays of Dryden are those of Thomas Rymer. His essays are written in a dull heavy style and show the intolerance which can, upon occasion afflict the critic. He writes that "poets would grow negligent if critics had not a strict eye upon their miscarriages." When Rymer writes he sets a book off rules on one side and the work under discussion of the other. When the work and the rules do not coincide; off with the writer's head! Macaulay calls him the "worst critic who ever lived" and we can hardly disagree when we come upon Rymer's masterpiece; "the neighing of a horse or the howling of a mastiff possess more meaning" than Shakespeare's verse.

But lest the reader feel that we have passed this period in too summary a fashion we must reiterate that the critical essay was almost an unknown quantity during the seventeenth century. With the exception of Dryden and Rymer there were practically no other critical essayists of the time. It was not till the eighteenth century that the critical essay sprang into prominence. With the coming of the Reviews, the magazines dealing with literary topics, came the demand for the critical essay. Amid the great abundance of the literature of the period, the reading public wished for men of knowledge and learning to bring to their notice books and articles worthy of their attention and to warn them of the hack writers of the time. Men who were masters in English literature devoted their time to criticism and the quality of their work attained such a level that it became an open question as to which was the higher form of literature; the critical or the creative. Still the path of the critical essay during this time was not entirely strewn with roses. It is a far call indeed, from the assertion of Collins that "the critical essay is to literature what laws and legislation are to the State" to Disraeli's famous question "You know who the critics are? the men who have failed in art and literature." The Reviews were extremely partisan in their political

beliefs at a time when politics pervaded literature. The editors had but two commandments: Glory to those of my party; Disgrace to it's opponents! Nevertheless criticism, and the critical essay especially, flourished and grew strong. Almost every one of the great writers used the critical essay; also a host of mediocre writers.

Early in the eighteenth century Joseph Addison exercised mild dictatorship over literature and in great part, critical literature. His earlier essays have a liveliness of humor and style that give them a high rank in the creative literature of the time but are rather lightly touched with critical matter. In his later essays in the Spectator and those upon the Pleasures of the Imagination are found deep learning, taste, and critical acuteness. But with all their erudition and style Addison can hardly be called the "first genuine critic" who brought criticism into line with modern thought and established a new principle of poetic appeal.

In the works of John Dennis, a contemporary of Addison, are found almost entirely opposite critical methods. His essays on Addison and Pope, which a later critic has characterized as "scurrilous and severe" are written in an extremely heavy and dogmatic style.

Dennis forms his criticisms according to set models; it

is the authors misfortune if they do not agree. His essays are replete with a logical or illogical reasoning which always proves that his conclusions "must" be right. He condemns Shakespeare terribly, insisting that all of Shakespeare's work shows a "want of art" and a disregard of "poetical justice."

It was during this same period that Jonathan Swift made his greatest contribution to critical literature when he wrote his essay "On the Corruptions of English Style and Writing." Here he laid down a set of rules for the acquisition and criticism of style in writing. He contributed other essays in criticism to the Tatler which are remarkable for their keen thought, good natured satire and power of presenting truth by ludicrous exaggeration.

Samuel Johnson, the great lexicographer, arose to fame shortly after the death of Swift, His contributions to the critical essay are voluminous. They are written in a style that is frequently turgid and artificial and his judgments are sometimes those of the tyrant. Precise in language, acute in observation and often scaling the heights to brilliancy in criticism, his fame as a critic rests nevertheless, more on his utterances as transcribed by Boswell than on his actual critical writings.

A contemporary of Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, was a typical reviewer. His critical essays were popular, due to the purity and facility of his style yet his criticisms were never precise nor accurate; nor do they display any great amount of erudition. Hurried off in the mere effort to make a living his reviews are those of the hack writer of the period, only distinguished from mediocrity through his natural ability.

"Gifford looks upon authors as Issac Walton did upon worms" This was Southey's comment upon the critical essays of William Gifford. Gifford was the editor of the Quarterly Review, one of the most famous literary magazines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His articles are written in a readable style and show a wealth of erudition; yet are full of a muck-raking, mud-slinging, scurrilous sort of censure, irrespective of the author or the work. Gifford's most famous or rather notorious essay is his article on the Endymion of Keats in which he exhausted a well-nigh inexhaustible fount of vituperation. A Whig in politics, he spared no Radical author; his criticisms are made up chiefly of attacks on the life and personal habits and vices of the author.

Exactly opposite to the methods used by Gifford are those which characterize the critical writings

of Coleridge and Wordsworth. The judicial method of criticism is seen to it's best advantage in the writings of Coleridge; most remarkably so in his essays on Shakespeare. Written in a prose that rivalled his poetic skill, they are in large part responsible for the exalted position Shakespeare held during the nineteenth century. Although Coleridge and Wordsworth differed in their views on poetry and had for their weapons the prefaces which each one wrote, they are still examples of that critical essay which can accomplish it's purpose with the least injury and offense to the writer in question.

The essays of Henry Hallam are other examples of the art of criticism as exemplified by Coleridge and Wordsworth. Written in a most uniform style, sincere and straight-forward, they impress the reader with the obvious fairness of the author. Giving proof of a wide knowledge and accuracy the critical essays of Hallam stand out conspicuously among the vicious, inaccurate, political-biased periodical criticisms of the day.

From the eminently fair writings of Hallam we come to the eminently unfair articles of Francis Jeffrey. Hampered by a narrow outlook upon life, with a natural timidity, his critical essays are harsh, arbitrary and domineering. Yet we must admit that at a time when dogmatic criticism had fallen to a state of pedantic

viciousness, he attempted, at least, to place it in its deserved position among the methods of criticism. Indeed, Saintsbury, with an entirely contrary view says "as an essayist, a writer of causeries, I do not think he has been surpassed among Englishmen in the art of interweaving quotation, abstract and comment."

Both in method and in style the essays of Jeffrey differ with these of Charles Lamb and Walter Savage Lander. Lamb's critical essays, especially the ones on the tragedies of Shakespeare show accurate and exquisite powers of discrimination and a deep discernment of the true meaning of the author. Lamb's object was "to show how our ancestors felt when they placed themselves by the power of the imaginations in trying situations, in the conflicts of duty or passion or the strife of contending duties." While Landor's idea of criticism was not extremely akin to that of Lamb, nevertheless his writings show the same carefulness and appreciation of beauty; the same subtle genius and profound thought. Although imbued with peculiarly pagan ideas and philosophy his critical essays are remarkably free from prejudice and bias.

Contemporaneous with the time of Lamb and Landor in the early part of the nineteenth century were a group of writers whose names are famous in the realm of

English literature and whose critical styles and methods are extremely varied and diversified. Here are the names: De Quincy, Wilson, Hazlitt, Macaulay, Hunt, Lockhart, Carlyle and Thackeray.

The critical essays of De Quincy are written in a pure forceful style, and their contents are a mixture of humor argument and elegance. Although cleverly disguised and seemingly types of creative literature, they are critical essays written in the judicial method of criticism. But though De Quincy used the judicial method, it is almost diametrically opposed to the dogmatic judgments which pervade the essays of Wilson, Wilson, the notorious Christopher North of Blackwoods, was typical of the boisterous, unrefined exaggerating reviewer whom authors so violently opposed. With capricious likes and dislikes, moved neither by reason nor principle, his critical essays are perfect examples of a degenerated and unbridled criticism.

Under a veneer of good manners, courtesy and wide knowledge many of the faults of Wilson are revealed in the critical essay of Thomas ^{B.} Macaulay. Written from a judgment seat from which there was no appeal Macaulay's critical essays are most categorical and one-sided. A brilliant lawyer he brought his legal ability into play and displayed one side of the question with an utter

disdain and ignoring of the opposite side. What was wrong was most emphatically wrong; what the right was impeccably right. Yet between Wilson and Macaulay there is one outstanding difference; Macaulay was always perfectly sure of himself: Wilson was not. In his apology to Leigh Hunt, Wilson said "The Animosities are mortal but the Humanities live forever." Against this Lord Melbourne says of Macaulay "I wish I could be as sure of one thing as Macaulay is of everything."

In the critical essays of William Hazlitt we see more critical acuteness, more careful elaboration of detail and occasionally more brilliancy of thought and expression than we do in Macaulay. And, on the other hand, we see more prejudice, abusiveness and bigoted viciousness than we do in Wilson. Politeness or a sense of good taste seem to have exerted no restraining influence upon his expressions of his unfavorable opinions of his opponents or contemporaries. Bursts of passion, aroused by political enmities crop out incongruously between paragraphs, displaying a critical erudition and ability which were really marvelous. Yet with all these faults the critical essays of Hazlitt by virtue of their beautiful figures, excellent choice of language and profound thought deserves a high rank in even the creative literature of England.

The critical essays of Leigh Hunt and Robert Southey form admirable contrasts with these of Hazlitt, The essays of Hunt were highly appreciative and discriminating, searching out the beauties of the work; Hazlitt's when not too violent were beautiful in themselves with a high creative power illumining the critical; Southey's, far from seeking beauty or having beauty sought out the faults and defects of the work. The essays of Hunt are written in a fine delicate style; Hazlitt's are both eloquent and beautiful while Southey writes in the harsh, rambling style of the literary demagogue.

John Lockhart a co-worker with Southey on the Quarterly Review shows many of the mannerisms and characteristics that have caused Southey to be called a harsh, overbearing critic, With a most dogmatic method of criticism written in a caustic, aggressive, keen style his critical essays have become associated with the work of the carping periodicalists of the time.

With the coming of the last half of the nineteenth century, however, we see a most interesting phase of the development of the critical essay. Mr. Goldwyn Smith remarks it and sees it in an unfavorable light when he says that "Criticism at the present time seems to have been limited to the saying of fine things."

The prevailing note of this new criticism was not to find fault according to rules, but to find beauty, whether according to rule or not. Of course this does not mean that no writer before this period used this method. Indeed, as we have seen, Dryden maintained that the force of the critical essay lie in the observance of the excellencies that should delight a reasonable reader. Later Leigh Hunt's essays consisted in the revelation of the beauties of his author. But though we find this appreciative criticism in isolated instances before this time, it was not until later in the nineteenth century that it became so widely practiced and diffused.

The greatest exponents of appreciation as a form of critical writing are Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater and George Saintsbury. Each one of these writers, though agreeing in the main essentials of appreciative critical writings, has emphasized a slightly different phase of action. Arnold, considered by many people the greatest critical essayist of all time, maintained that "Criticism is the disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." Thus Arnold does not use the judicial method of criticism strictly in itself; he does not wish to classify a work according to it's merit or demerit. He would rather have criticism attain it's station "By keeping aloof from what is called

the practical view of things; by resolutely following the law of it's nature which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it chooses." Saintsbury is more of a dogmatist. He feels that "criticism is the endeavor to find, to know, to love, to recommend, not only, the best, but all the good, that has been thought and written in the world." Arnold wishes to disseminate the best of everything that is thought and known; Saintsbury wishes rather, to make distinctions for the reader as to which is best; which second best and so on down the line until the public can choose and know just when they are reading the best, the fair, or the worst. Walter Pater again, differs slightly from both Arnold and Saintsbury. He writes that "to feel the virtue of the poet or painter, to disengage it, to set it forth--these are the three stages of the critic's duty." Pater, a follower of the principle of Longinus that pleasure is all would have the critical essayist search after and set forth the qualities, then, which caused the pleasure. Arnold insists upon looking at the object itself; Pater wishes to look behind it; Saintsbury would look at the object in comparison to others. Arnold will appreciate a work and give the reasons why he appreciated it; Pater will appreciate it and tell what rules make it worthy of

appreciation. But although in method and manner these critics may belong to the same school, if we may class it as a school, it is in their style that we notice a difference. Arnold is the master craftsman; the master of his tools; the product of wide learning, and thought. With a most remarkable felicity in expressing his views on any subject his writings are always scrupulously pleasant and agreeable and run along with the same happiness that we are accustomed to see in Addison. Saintsbury writes in a rather heavy style, heavily weighted with classical allusions, and strives for such an impartial and fair estimate that at times it strikes the reader full in the face with its obviousness. Pater writes with a full and careful elaboration, in rich and sonorous phrase, which shows, not the genius, but the careful, methodical, hard-working student.

Although these three writers are representative of the critical essayists of the later nineteenth century, there are one or two essayists whom we cannot overlook. Foremost among these is Henry D Traill whose critical essays are examples of the true literary merit that can go into magazine reviews. While perhaps not as powerful in the field of pure literary criticism as the authors we have just seen, his essays on Coleridge and Sterne and his reviews of the books of the day can

be compared with any examples of the art of the critical essayist without grievously suffering. His essays are permeated with a pleasant humour and good-natured wit and are written in the terse, snappy, brisk style of the journalist. The critical essays of Edmund Gosse are rather Arnoldian in method and style but deal almost entirely with the beauties and eccentricities of foreign authors whose works are but little known.

In contrast to the appreciative judicial and creative criticism of the nineteenth century is the critical essay of our own day. It is not an appreciation, usually, though it can be of a most virulently appreciative nature when the critic and author are members of the same publishing staff. With the exception of the essays of Brander Matthews and J.E. Epingarn it does not enter the field of purely literary criticism, for this type needs knowledge, learning, erudition on many topics. It is not of a dogmatic type except in those instances where the critic happens to be a "revolutionist", or of "the new school" in literature, when this is true it becomes harshly dogmatic because the critic has no rules to guide him and therefore must judge fully and completely lest he be accused of having no idea of the "new" literature. It is to a high degree, impressionistic, but of the lowest impressionism, namely that of the general effect.

This critic either "likes" a work or he does not like it. If he likes it he usually calls it powerful, sweet, charming or some kindred anquility. If he dislikes it, he will be positive of the fact that it "will not sell". To him the fact that a work is "one of the six best seller@s" its greatest recommendation; the fact that the author also writes for the moving pictures is his most powerful claim to authorship; the fact that the publishing house expect to make a fortune on the work, its best claim to existence, of course, this is not true of every critical essay. In a very few of our most reputable literary magazines and some of the large collegiate productions we still find the critical essay as a distinct form in literary practise modelled after that of Arnold, Macaulay and Dryden, and with a distinct phase of the creative in its make-up. Yet, shameful to say these are in the very small minority. Nor is the reason far to seek. In the last fifty years mass education has taken a farther step forward than at any other single period in the history of the world, but, on the other hand, individual culture and refinement have declined. But the inference is not to be drawn that we are less civilized or enlightened or as a race, of less culture. It means, rather, that we are becoming specialists, in some form or other, to an alarming degree. In science, in art, in music, in the professions, in the ranks of the manual laborer has this become a fact. No longer, except among a very, very

few of our population, need a man possess wide knowledge in all matters; encyclopaedic knowledge is not recognized. Let a man be proficient in one small branch of knowledge and we are satisfied. As a result, it is hard to interest him in world-wide or even nation-wide movements. Witness our apathy, as a nation, to the operation of our government. And this day of newspaper headlines and short story magazines, the critical essayist, to reach his audience, cannot look upon his art as a creative form in literature. He must conform to the wishes of his readers or they will not read his writings. He must tell them his thought in a short, terse, head-lining fashion which will convey ideas without causing thought. Accordingly, he tells them, in as few words and as few ideas as possible, his reaction to work in question. And his readers, accustomed to think only in their own speciality, and to accept the views of other specialists on other matters are confident that their reaction will closely approximate that of the critic. Let a critic condemn a work without rhyme or reason and his readers say "why read the work. Somebody has read it for us and has been disgusted", Let the critic praise the work, however, confess his feeling of pleasure and satisfaction, and whether worthy or not, the work will be read in factory and in mansions, in parlors and in kitchen. The reception accorded a recent work in

in fiction which was highly praised by our reviewers and critics, has attained monstrous proportions. And yet the book has no reasons for existence. It is not creative; it is no more addition to the art of literature than futuristic or cubist daubing is to the art of painting.

And there is yet another reason. In the periods of past history especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literature and politics went almost hand in hand. As a result the man of letters, the genius in the field of literature was protected by society; he was considered an asset to the human race in general and to the political party he belonged to in particular and was, to some degree, cared for in the shape of monetary consideration. There was not so much room for the contending forces of the law of self preservation and the impulses of artistic expression.

Literary Criticism This then is the critical essay of the twentieth century. And as we follow it through its course from Dryden to Arnold we see it as a form in literary composition, unifying and developing criticism and following though with many and peculiar divagations the ideal, "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propogate the best that is known and thought in the world."

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