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Arthur Quiller-Couch, Taste Formation and the New Reading Public

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‘To nurse that spark, common to the king, the sage, the poorest child ... this is what I mean by the Art of Reading’: Arthur Quiller-Couch, Taste Formation and the New Reading Public

English literature as an academic discipline was in an anomalous position in the early decades of the twentieth century. The subject had been a mainstay in Scottish universities for well over a century, and was one of the first to have dedicated chairs in the great nineteenth-century educational institutions of London, Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham. English was also a popular choice among extramural students, particularly within schemes such as the University Extension Movement, founded in the 1870s under the aegis of Oxford, Cambridge, London and Manchester’s Victoria University. Perhaps surprisingly, however, and certainly paradoxical in terms of educational policy, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge refused to offer honours-level degrees in English until 1894 and 1917 respectively.¹ In the last two decades of the nineteenth century this issue had prompted a prolonged and rancorous dispute between scholars, journalists and even politicians, as questions were raised over whether English literature was sufficiently scholarly (and indeed examinable) to warrant inclusion as an academic discipline in England’s two oldest and most respected universities. Edward A. Freeman, Professor of Modern History at Oxford, spoke for many when he described English as ‘merely light, elegant, interesting’, and therefore certainly not an appropriate subject for an honours degree: ‘the temptation to go by mere taste or opinion’ when marking examination papers, he suggested, ‘would be almost irresistible’.² Others including William Morris, Grant Allen and even Matthew Arnold urged John Churton Collins, the strongest advocate for university-level literary study in this period, to abandon his campaign for an English School at Oxford. Nevertheless, certain crucial developments did, in spite of such weighty opposition, take place at the ancient English universities: the Oxford School of English was created in 1894 (although there was no professor of literature there until Walter Raleigh’s appointment in 1904), and in 1910, newspaper magnate Sir Harold Harmsworth donated money for a chair of English literature at Cambridge, in memory of King Edward VII, who had died earlier that year.

As a way of countering the charges of dilettantism and vagueness that were currently being directed at the subject, Collins was keen to present English as a demanding,

¹ The subject was taught at each of these universities in some degree before this time, although the emphasis was very much on philology, or language study, rather than literature.

² Edward A. Freeman, ‘Literature and Language’, *Contemporary Review*, 52 (1887).

systematically-structured academic discipline, complete with a specific methodology and procedures for assessment. But his reasons for marking out the parameters of his discipline go beyond simply asserting its scholarly credentials; he was also an enthusiastic exponent of new professional values, and wanted to ensure that all future journalists, critics and professors underwent rigorous training (preferably from either Oxford or Cambridge) before being licensed to speak with any authority about literature and the “correct” approach to literary interpretation. This system of procedures, assessments, specialist knowledge and degree-level qualifications – what we might term professional accreditation – had become increasingly familiar by the end of the nineteenth century, with more and more occupations now requiring that prospective employees garnered a specific set of skills before they could be deemed qualified for a particular job. The shift towards greater professionalisation in literary criticism was very much at odds with the principles held by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, appointed to the new Cambridge chair in 1912 following the early death of the first incumbent A. W. Verrall. At this stage Quiller-Couch was known to the public as the bestselling author of adventure stories set in Cornwall, including *Astonishing History of Troy Town* (1888) and *The Delectable Duchy: Stories, Studies, and Sketches* (1893). He had also completed R. L. Stevenson’s draft of *St. Ives* in 1898, and produced the *Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900* in 1900 (extended to 1918 in a new edition of 1939), which became the standard anthology of English poetry for a generation. John Gross’s description of Quiller-Couch’s appointment as an ‘astonishingly unacademic choice’³ therefore seems an accurate one, as is the suggestion that this was a political move instigated by Lloyd George, who wished to reward Quiller-Couch for his work for the Liberal party in Cornwall. Quiller-Couch expressed his own feelings about the new job to his friend Sydney Cockerell in 1912: ‘I am in a dreadful funk, of course, but marching forward ... with my eyes shut’. A few years into the post he described the agony of having to ‘sit down & sweat out’ lectures; reflecting back on this period some 30 years later he admitted that he had been ‘overawed’ by a job for which he felt ill-qualified. His lack of experience, he wrote in a letter, accounted for the ‘stilted phrasing of some of those early lectures’: ‘You see, I had never lectured before in my life, barring some efforts on Virgil & Aristophanes – College lectures merely, at Oxford, when I was 21’.⁴

³ John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London 1969), p. 185.

⁴ These letters, written to Sydney Cockerell between 1912 and 1942, are stored at the National Library of Scotland (Acc. 8693).

Quiller-Couch's inaugural lecture took place on 29 January 1913, with more than a thousand in attendance. It was an important occasion: he needed to win over the anti-literature faction, and to convince them, further, that the right man was in charge. The new professor took this opportunity to offer a remarkable manifesto for the subject, making it clear that he was entirely at odds with the philological approach that was dominating literary studies at that time. He referred back to the terms of the original appointment as laid out by Harmsworth in 1910, which had stipulated that 'The Professor shall treat this subject on literary and critical rather than on philological and linguistic lines'. Instead of considering literary texts simply as specimens for detailed grammatical analysis (as was the current emphasis at Oxford), Quiller-Couch was determined that his students would study a work '*absolutely*' – that is, directly and open-mindedly, and focusing on its aesthetic impact. This stress on 'artistic expression' would refine the individual's 'critical judgment'; instead of identifying linguistic 'accidents and irrelevancies', they would be taught to evaluate a text's aesthetic qualities. In this inaugural lecture Quiller-Couch also declared that he was unwilling to adopt a systematic method for studying literature, or be distracted by preconceived notions of categorisation. He insisted that 'Literature is not an abstract Science, to which exact definitions can be applied', and wished to concentrate on the 'concrete' rather than the theoretical, 'eschewing ... all general definitions and theories', and treating each piece of writing as a distinctly idiosyncratic work – individual and subjective, 'the success of which depends on personal persuasiveness, on the author's skill to give as on ours to receive'. Moreover, akin to the generalist, belletristic writing style of figures like George Saintsbury and Arnold Bennett, Quiller-Couch resolved to avoid complex terminology, explaining that 'when we come to particular criticism I shall endeavour to exchange it with you in plain terms'. 'Definitions, formulæ' would be shunned in favour of 'style', 'genius', and 'author's intention' – aspects he felt 'cannot in their nature be readily brought to rule-of-thumb tests'.⁵

Quiller-Couch did flaunt his knowledge of the literary field in this first lecture, but with a definite lightness of touch, calmly gesturing towards an array of writers and texts from the classical period to the present day. The carefully judged lecture was a stunning success: a review of his performance in the *Manchester Guardian* admitted that 'What surprised some of us who have known Sir Arthur merely as "Q" was the wide range of the literature which he knew and loved. He was perfectly at home with Greek and Roman poets, as well as with

⁵ Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Writing*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge 1916).

English and French authors. The quotations with which he illustrated his remarks, covered, one might almost say, the whole range of classical and English poetry'. Moreover, while 'His qualifications in knowledge are ample' for the chair, he is 'also a man of great ideals', and 'He was genuine, one of those rare enthusiasts to whom the educated love to listen'.⁶

Following this impressive start, Quiller-Couch rapidly became one of the most recognisable and popular figures around Cambridge. Student-run newspaper the *Cambridge Review* described his appointment as 'probably the most popular which could possibly have been made',⁷ and later reported that he 'has won for his lectures a unique place in the University; he has established his chair firmly in the affection of Cambridge'.⁸ The fortnightly lectures were invariably overflowing with students, who tended to express their approval loudly: a letter from one student, printed in the *Cambridge Review* in March 1916, complained that the frequent 'rowdy applause' from the rest of the audience was ruining their enjoyment of the lectures. The correspondent acknowledged that while 'Everyone who hears these readings [from Shakespeare] ... must wish to express his thanks audibly', still 'the burst of clapping and stamping with which [the audience] greets a tragic or pathetic passage is simply repulsive'.⁹

* * *

While Quiller-Couch was causing a stir at Cambridge, he remained an active publishing author, and quickly realised the potential for reprinting these lectures for a wider readership. This was a time of great opportunities in publishing, with literature of almost every kind flourishing after the 1870 Education Act and subsequent emergence of the "new reading public." Long periods of inactivity and the curtailment of leisure pursuits during the First World War had further intensified the demand for reading material: Joseph McAleer notes that 'war workers' (either on the Front Line or in roles closer to home) had turned to reading as a distraction and to relieve boredom, with 'escapist fiction' and 'lighter forms of reading' forming the most obvious areas of growth – a librarian at the Guildford Institute reported that "light" literature never sat on his shelves more than a few hours, such was the demand'.¹⁰ Nevertheless we can also suppose that there was an increase in readers looking for the more

⁶ "'Q" as Professor: First Lecture at Cambridge', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Jan. 1913.

⁷ 'King Edward VII. Professorship', *Cambridge Review*, 7 Nov. 1912.

⁸ 'Sir A. T. Quiller-Couch's Lectures', *Cambridge Review*, 17 Nov. 1915.

⁹ 'A Rebuke for "Q's" Audience', Letter, *Cambridge Review*, 8 Mar. 1916.

¹⁰ Joseph McAleer., *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950*, Clarendon (Oxford 1992), p. 72.

serious literature that offered certain aesthetic qualities beyond simple escapism or frothy romance. This assumption gathers strength when we consider the success of publications like *John O'London's Weekly (JOLW)*, launched in 1919 and with an accessible format comprising good-humoured literary advice, interviews with authors, miscellaneous articles, and excerpts from new and classic texts. Its editor Wilfred Whitten was committed to inspiring ordinary men and women to read as much as possible and feel able to navigate their way through the literary field, and he clearly understood the needs of his putative readership: *JOLW* was an immediate success. Jonathan Wild has suggested that 'a combined weekly readership of, say, 500,000 would not appear an unreasonable assessment'.¹¹ Advice on "what to read" was in great demand in this period more generally: self-help, the Smilesian ideal of achieving upward social mobility through one's own endeavours, had become a watchword for ambitious Board-school educated white-collar workers and working-class autodidacts, and much of the energy was focused on the development of literary discernment, towards forging an image of themselves as erudite, cultured individuals. Competition for clerical jobs was fierce, and being able to present oneself as an urbane and knowledgeable employee was likely to prove advantageous in this respect. After 1918, entertaining and instructive reading advice was also being sought by those ex-wartime workers for whom reading had become a part of their daily routine, as well as recently demobilised officers, derogatorily termed "temporary gentlemen", whose return to pre-war clerical positions had undermined the social elevation they were afforded during the conflict, and for whom the yearning to understand and absorb the highest forms of culture (as befitting their wartime experience of a higher class bracket) was now particularly acute.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that 1920 was therefore an ideal time for Quiller-Couch to publish some of his Cambridge lectures under the didactic-sounding title *On the Art of Reading*, and this rather makeshift manual (consisting of 12 lectures originally delivered between 1916 and 1918) was hugely popular – the volume was reprinted several times in its first year (priced at 15s.) and brought out as a 5s. pocket edition in 1924. As with *JOLW*, clerks, secretaries and shop workers were likely to have formed a core part of the readership of Quiller-Couch's course of lectures, and the success of the volume confirmed that a captive readership existed for those who were able to explain, warmly but authoritatively, how to embark on a self-directed programme of reading. The course was also welcomed by critics,

¹¹ Jonathan Wild, "Insects in Letters": *John O'London's Weekly* and the New Reading Public', *Literature and History* 15.2 (2006).

who felt it served the needs of this amorphous new readership well – a review in the *Manchester Guardian* reassured them that ‘though he intended it in the first place for students, nothing less academic, in the forbidding sense of that word, ever came from a university. There is on every page a fresh, infectious, boyish enthusiasm. “On the Art of Reading” is a book for all’.¹²

Quiller-Couch, for his part, was enthusiastic about the emergence of this ‘New Reading Public’. In a series of articles for *JOLW* (later adapted into lectures for the 1929 volume *Studies in Literature*) he rebuffed the ‘present-day critic’ who ‘seems unable to realise that while he has been improving upon his predecessors, the great middle-class he so constantly derides has been improving itself concurrently, and even to the degree of reading and admiring his own admirable work’ Quiller-Couch publicly backed the work of self-improvement schemes such as the Pelman Institute¹³ and was a patron of the London School of Journalism, and in this particular article he expressed his wholehearted support for the expansion of public libraries. In the Cambridge lectures, moreover, he declared that literature and culture must be readily available to all, irrespective of class or income: ‘There must be no picking and choosing among the recipients, no appropriation of certain forms of culture to certain “stations of life”’.¹⁴ Access to reading material was therefore a central concern for Quiller-Couch, and he generally welcomed contemporary developments in publishing that lowered the cost of books. One such scheme was the innumerable series of classic works, reprinted cheaply, which flooded the literary marketplace during the period.¹⁵ Nevertheless in *On the Art of Reading* he also grasped the opportunity to denounce Sir John Lubbock’s “100 Best Books” idea, and indeed any other list or library of supposedly essential canonical works that tacitly prescribed which books one should read. Instead he urged individuals to feel their own way through the literary field, and read whatever gave them pleasure, thereby developing a more organic, idiosyncratic relationship with books: ‘Considering for a moment how personal a thing is Literature, you will promptly assure yourselves that there is – there can be – no such thing as the Hundred Best Books ... why should the Best Books be 100 in

¹² B. S., ‘The Art of Reading’, *Manchester Guardian* 12 Aug. 1920.

¹³ Pelmanism was a system of memory training devised in the 1890s, and later taught through distance learning by the Pelman Institute. The aim was to improve memory, concentration and verbal expression through courses of specially-designed mental exercises.

¹⁴ Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Reading*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge 1920).

¹⁵ Cheaper paper and more efficient printing processes, together with the expiration of copyright for a huge number of authors, led to the inculcation of series such as the Temple Classics, Nelson’s Classics, Penny Poets, Cassell’s National Library and Routledge’s Universal Library, which offered individual volumes for as little as a penny each.

number, rather than 99 or 199? And under what conditions is a book a Best Book? There are moods in which we not only prefer Pickwick to the Rig-Vedas or Sakuntalà, but find that it does us more good'. His non-elitist attitude towards individual reading preferences is clearly in evidence here; reflecting back on this issue several years later he reiterated the point that '*No book can mean the same to any two men*', and therefore 'Read such books as attract you'.

These lectures in fact reverberate with Quiller-Couch's various suspicions towards those who appeared to have based their reading on publishers' lists, or otherwise adopted a systematic, scholarly approach to the literary field that furnished them with great reams of facts. The 'best purpose' of reading, he insisted, 'is not to accumulate Knowledge' but instead 'to produce, to educate, such-and-such a man'. The emphasis he placed on intangible, unquantifiable wisdom marks Quiller-Couch's distance from other professors who found it more conducive to divide literature into specific epochs, draw up clear syllabuses, and test students' knowledge in the examination hall. As far back as 1891 Collins had mooted 'a series of volumes corresponding to each of the periods into which the history of our Literature naturally divides itself', which could effectively explain the 'environment, social, political, moral, intellectual' of each period, the relationship between English and the literature of other countries, and finally provide a list of key writers and their works, categorised into genre.¹⁶ In his lectures Quiller-Couch dismissed this type of primer as simply missing the point of reading, which was for the purposes of enjoyment above all else. For him it was a 'pardonable mistake, but yet a mistake, to hope that by the employ of separate specialists you can get even in 15 or 20 volumes a perspective, a proportionate description, of what English Literature really *is*'. Accumulating vast swathes of knowledge also risked turning one into a prig; he warned readers that adopting too studious a demeanour had the potential to mark one out as either pretentious or overeager, and therefore liable to irritate others or leave one open to mockery: while 'All knowledge is venerable', and 'Bacon tells us that reading maketh a full man', still 'too much of it makes him too full'. As a reviewer in the *Times* phrased it, 'he [Quiller-Couch] would never be glad of the spectacle of that estimable young man, alluded to in Mr. George Moore's "Confessions," who would tell you, pocket-

¹⁶ John Churton Collins, *The Study of English Literature: A Plea for its Recognition and Organization at the Universities*, Macmillan and Co., (London 1891) pp. 37, 38. Although Collins and Quiller-Couch offer us a particularly useful contrast in terms of their polarised approaches to literary study and interpretation, they were by no means the only academics entangled in this issue. In Carol Atherton's *Defining Literary Criticism* she identifies W. P. Ker (University College London), Walter Raleigh (Oxford), A. C. Bradley (Oxford) and George Saintsbury (Edinburgh) as further proponents of generalist, sage-like literary scholarship, while men such as Henry Morley and W. J. Courthope adopted a more systematic, workmanlike approach to the subject.

book in hand, “Last year I read 10 plays by Nash, 12 by Peele, six by Greene, 15 by Beaumont and Fletcher, and 11 anonymous plays – 54 in all”.¹⁷ Quiller-Couch advised readers that their intellectualism should be worn lightly, denoting a more innate, cultivated appreciation of literature; parading one’s hard-won knowledge was uncouth, the behaviour of a pedant.

Rather than simply memorise facts, he urged readers to work on developing their literary taste, enabling them to recognise and appreciate what constituted good writing, gain confidence in discussing the more aesthetic aspects of a text, and apply these sensibilities when choosing their own reading material. This notion of ‘taste’ is a difficult term to define, but tends to indicate an almost instinctive appreciation of cultural excellence – drawing, for its aesthetic touchstones, on the established models of the Western canon. Having good taste marked one out as an urbane, discerning reader and an advocate of high culture; being able to converse fluently about aspects such as literary style and authorial intention therefore offered significant cultural cachet, and was a much more effective way of impressing one’s friends and colleagues than ostentatiously listing the books one had read that week.¹⁸ A series of articles Arnold Bennett wrote for *T. P.’s Weekly* over a few months from October 1908 had been published in a volume titled *Literary Taste: How to Form It* in 1909, providing readers with step-by-step instructions on the qualities to look for in canonical texts, and highlighting the enjoyment and pleasure one could look forward to in the process. Quiller-Couch likewise maintained that the important task of developing one’s literary taste could offer considerable satisfaction: ‘refinement in literary judgment is one of the few consolations of old age’, yet ‘life would be dull for any one of us who started upon our reading or writing with a taste already refined’. Specific guidelines from Quiller-Couch as to how one might actually reach the point of having good taste were conspicuously absent from these lectures – although he did recommend that one should begin with a classic text. As outlined above, he was reluctant to prescribe a list of titles to read, but when embarking on the task of refining one’s literary taste, he suggested readers would do well to begin with a text already deemed a “masterpiece” by generations of literary tastemakers, and against which they could safely test and cultivate their own responses. The only other piece of advice Quiller-Couch offered was simply to read the play, poem or novel as an isolated piece of writing, ‘to treat it *absolutely*’,

¹⁷ ‘Books of the Week’, *Times* 5 Aug. 1920.

¹⁸ With more and cheaper books available than ever before, and increased leisure time for reading, ‘taste’ was the one thing this readership felt it still lacked.

with the sole purpose of ascertaining its content and plot. Readers should therefore immerse themselves in the text and ‘incorporate it, incarnate it’. Supposedly minor interpretative difficulties, Quiller-Couch believed, would then be swept away in the onrush of aesthetic pleasure: he offered a close reading of a passage from *The Tempest* in order to identify some of the grammatical and interpretative complexities that might cloud an individual’s reading of the play, before calmly dismissing these as ‘*reserved delights*’ that in no way affected one’s enjoyment of the scene. Several reviewers were impressed with Quiller-Couch’s breezy enthusiasm, but regretted the lack of functional advice: the *Manchester Guardian* commended him for ‘the confident energy with which, like a bracing wind, he overrides scruples, sweeps away cobwebs, and creates the atmosphere he believes in’, but was less convinced that learning ‘to understand and assimilate great literature’ was necessarily a straightforward task: ‘high up the slope, he calls to us all cheerily to follow him ... but we wish he had not suggested that the road was level, for if we take him at his word we shall suffer a cruel disillusion’.¹⁹ It is certainly the case that Quiller-Couch’s priority was to communicate his own enthusiasm for literature, and this does detract from the potential usefulness of the lectures as a didactic tool; he was certain that each of his readers would soon come to recognise what constituted good writing, but failed to acknowledge the potentially daunting nature of the task.

Instead Quiller-Couch devoted several of the lectures to descriptions of the thrill, or epiphany – the highly charged emotional response to classic texts. In one particular lecture he illustrated this idea with a lengthy treatise on the tripartite formulation ‘*What Does, What Knows, What Is*’, the interpolated gloss of Theotypas in Robert Browning’s 1864 poem ‘Death in the Desert.’ Quiller-Couch suggested that the first of these categories – ‘What Does’ – referred to those wishing to embark on writing careers of their own, an endeavour he urged them to continue with as the means to improve their own writing style. The second phrase, ‘What Knows’, represented the accumulation of facts, which (as outlined above) he believed was a futile endeavour. ‘What Is’, finally, was the category most valued by Quiller-Couch; he defined this as ‘the spiritual element in man’ and ‘the highest object of his study’. Elsewhere in the lectures Quiller-Couch wrote of authors that ‘They teach us to lift our own souls’ and here he emphasised, in appropriately laudatory terms, the delight that could be accrued from reading:

¹⁹ B. S., ‘The Art of Reading’, *Manchester Guardian* 12 Aug. 1920.

To nurse that spark, common to the king, the sage, the poorest child – to fan, to draw up to a flame, to ‘educate’ *What Is* – to recognise that it is divine, yet frail, tender, sometimes easily tired, easily quenched under piles of book-learning – to let it run at play very often, even more often to let it rest in what Wordsworth calls

a wise passiveness

passive – to use a simile of Coventry Patmore – as a photographic plate which finds stars that no telescope can discover, simply by waiting with its face turned upward – to mother it, in short, as wise mothers do their children – this is what I mean by the Art of Reading (layout in orig.).

For Quiller-Couch, the reader’s principal objective should be to embrace this quasi-sublime encounter with particularly striking passages. While his advice might appear too lofty to be of much practical value, many of his autodidact readers would have been familiar with such a moment of inspiration: Jonathan Rose has written of the ‘self-educated’ that they ‘have only limited time to make up enormous gaps. They must move more quickly, they have hungrier minds, and they will passionately embrace any book that opens up a new intellectual landscape’.²⁰ Far from ignoring the needs of his readers, Quiller-Couch was in fact displaying an authentic insight into their cultural encounters. He also suggested that literature could provide readers with rather more humble benefits, including an occasional distraction from their day-to-day routines, ‘a retirement from mean occupations, a well of refreshment, sustainment in the daily drudgery of life, solace in calamity, an inmate by the hearth, ever sociable, never intrusive – to be sought and found, to be found and dropped at will’. Literature could teach one a true sense of proportion, too: having witnessed the full spectrum of human disaster and success in his or her reading, the individual might be less likely to overreact when similar situations occurred in their own lives. Intangible benefits such as these, Quiller-Couch believed, were unobtainable when one approached literature in the more

²⁰ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Yale University Press (New Haven 2010), p. 404. In the absence of any first-hand testimony from individual readers of Quiller-Couch’s volume, Wilfred Whitten’s remarks furnish us with a useful insight into their likely response. Whitten had an innate understanding of *JOLW* readers, and these also formed a key readership for *On the Art of Reading*. A page-long article written by him confirms for us that Quiller-Couch had struck the right note: ‘Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch teaches the Art of Reading as an intensive culture of the soul in no way dependent, in its essence, on “schemes of study,” “courses of reading,” grasp of “tendencies,” and what not. All these have their use and place, but they are not the core of the matter. That core is spiritual and intellectual communion with great spirits who have uttered “memorable things about *Life*” (“Q” on the Art of Reading’, *John O’London’s Weekly*, 4 Sept. 1920).

professional manner of academics such as John Churton Collins, who insisted on placing each text into its particular genre, considered it within the contextual framework of environment and author, and thereafter subjected it to minute critical analysis. Something crucial was lost when one imposed a restrictive notion of categorisation on a text, thereby draining it of vitality and overlooking its capacity for solace and delight: ‘the trouble of *professionising* Literature’, for Quiller-Couch, is that ‘We exile it from the business of life, in which it would ever be at our shoulder, to befriend us’.

As further confirmation of his antipathy towards professionalisation, Quiller-Couch declared elsewhere in the volume that he could see no point in setting examinations in English. Once again citing his distrust of ‘massed information’, he claimed to be unconvinced that exams offered an effective way of testing an individual’s understanding of literature, and argued that ‘after two years’ reading with a man and talk with him about literature, I should have a far better sense of his industry, of his capacity, of his performance and (better) of his promise, than any examination is likely to yield me’. Indeed ‘the most original minds are just those for whom, in a *literary* examination, it is hardest to set a paper’. The timing of these remarks might be deemed somewhat inappropriate given that negotiations regarding the establishment of the Cambridge English Tripos were ongoing and often fraught.²¹ Comments of this type were therefore unlikely to please his colleagues such as H. M. Chadwick and H. F. Stewart, who at that time were fighting hard to convince the University Senate that their new English Tripos remained scholarly and examinable even when devoid of a philological component.²² The men and women purchasing Quiller-Couch’s lectures, on the other hand, were likely to have subscribed to his views: whereas students embarking on a university degree or University Extension course, or signing up with the Workers’ Educational Association, often worked towards a certificate or diploma, autodidacts and individual self-improvers tended to build up their literary knowledge on an unstructured, ad hoc basis. The *JOLW* review of Quiller-Couch’s volume commended the book for not, ‘in any sense,

²¹ Quiller-Couch himself took a leading role in this groundbreaking overhaul of the Cambridge syllabus, although he was less willing to embroil himself in administrative details; in *The Muse Unchained* E. M. W. Tillyard has written that ‘Regulations bored him, and he was content to leave them in other hands. Nor was he willing to submit to that constant attendance at meetings without which a man cannot be an effective routine politician’. Nevertheless in Margaret Mathieson’s *The Preachers of Culture* she has described him as the ‘main apologist’ of the new Tripos.

²² The Cambridge English Tripos was established in 1917, with the first exams taken in 1919. Students now sitting for an English degree had no mandatory philological components to complete; the new syllabus was primarily modern, literary, and evaluative. Further adjustments took place in 1926, chief among them the introduction of practical criticism, and the inclusion of set texts that students could prepare for their examinations. Tillyard’s 1958 book *The Muse Unchained* offers a detailed account of these developments.

form[ing] a text-book',²³ and readers of this same issue of the paper would have spotted, just two pages on from the Quiller-Couch's review, a half-page advertisement for 'Self Education Courses' offered by the University Correspondence College, 'for self-improvement and without any examination in view.'²⁴

While Quiller-Couch was generally ill-disposed towards examinations, he did suggest how one might begin to teach a text – whether in the classroom or by oneself at home. Provided a solid teaching method was in place that inculcated students in the art of careful reading, and exam papers were written in such a way as to call on them to exercise these skills, the questions were unlikely to cause too much harm or disturbance: 'Say that it is only an examination, and silly at that. Still you have been learning the art, you have been training yourself to be, for a better purpose, effective'. As we saw earlier, Quiller-Couch had been reluctant to instruct readers on how to develop a taste for the classics; in this lecture on teaching techniques he was much more specific, and the advice he gave could equally be applied in a classroom situation or followed by the individual self-improver who wished to read in a more directed fashion in their leisure time. He suggested, firstly, taking into account the historical context of the work, for 'literature cannot be divorced from life', and 'you cannot understand Chaucer aright ... unless you know the kind of men for whom Chaucer wrote and the kind of men whom he made speak'. Put another way, some sense of literary history would allow one to trace the impact of contemporary social and political circumstances on a given work and to ascertain its intended readership, adding necessary depth to the interpretation. Quiller-Couch also recommended acquainting oneself with the author's biography, because 'Until you have grasped those men, as men, you cannot grasp their writings. That is the *personal* side of literary study, and as necessary as the other'. This was an idea Quiller-Couch may have borrowed from French literary critic Sainte-Beuve, whose causerie essays were as much concerned with the author's life as with the writing; for him, knowledge of the writer's biography offered key insights into the construction and meaning of the work under review.²⁵ Having gathered the requisite contextual knowledge,

²³ "'Q" on the Art of Reading', *John O'London's Weekly*, 4 Sept. 1920.

²⁴ In his article 'John O'London's Weekly and the Modern Author', Patrick Collier notes that 'the advertisements for correspondence colleges ... through their sheer number and the relentless iteration of their message could not help but color the experience of reading *John O'London's*. The London School of Journalism placed long, text-heavy advertisements virtually every week'.

²⁵ Sainte-Beuve was a serious, unflinching critic who devoted his entire life to his craft, following a strict monastic regimen of early starts and long solitary days of research and writing. Over the last 20 years of his life, from 1849 onwards, he wrote a weekly causerie for French newspaper the *Le Constitutionnel* and then the *Le Moniteur*. These articles would often take the author's biography as a starting point.

Quiller-Couch suggested one could begin to analyse the work itself, and he took Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as an example of how one might do so. After reading the poem thoroughly a few times, he recommended turning to Keats's other works in order to ascertain that this poem is, by comparison, 'regular in stanza form', and 'in spite of its outburst in the 3rd stanza – "More happy love! more happy, happy love" etc. – much severer in tone than, e.g., the *Ode to a Nightingale* or the *Ode to Psyche*'. The idea here, we can assume, was to encourage the novice reader to enlarge his or her vision by reading several poems in the Keats canon. Quiller-Couch then advocated examining the original poem again – slowly, and line by line, while thinking closely about some of the ideas informing it, but making sure always to include one's own opinions about the text within the analysis: 'does Pegasus come down again and again on the prints from which he took off? If he do this, and the action of the Ode be dead and unprogressive, is the defect covered by beauty of language? Can such defect ever be so covered?' Despite this ostensibly set methodology, Quiller-Couch's approach to textual analysis was by no means fixed; 'heaven forbid', he wrote, 'that as a teacher I should *insist* even on half of those [points] I have indicated'. His primary emphasis, as always, was on eliciting pure delight from the reader, and while the teacher was responsible for communicating their enthusiasm for the text and pointing out particularly noteworthy passages, it was just as important for the individual to discover his or her own favourite lines.

* * *

For the creators of Cambridge English in the inter-war era, most prominent among them Mansfield Forbes, I. A. Richards, E. M. W. Tillyard and F. R. Leavis, Quiller-Couch must at times have seemed an anachronism, the scholar-gentleman of a previous age, before belletrism was successfully eradicated in favour of scientific rigour.²⁶ By the 1920s Quiller-Couch was in his sixties, and though he was still spending much of his time at Cambridge, and remained as popular with students as ever, his laudatory, non-schematic approach to literary interpretation was increasingly at odds with the some of the newer ideas shaping the subject such as practical criticism, which was introduced onto the syllabus after the Tripos was refashioned midway through the decade. Quiller-Couch was not, however, entirely out of

²⁶ In a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* on 19 December 1975, Leavis referred to Quiller-Couch's 'Victorian sense of decorum', and noted that under him 'the old "system" went on in the old way: Q was old, lazy and a gentleman'. Nevertheless Leavis always remained loyal to his former PhD supervisor, and Quiller-Couch in turn was very supportive of him, even securing him a university lectureship in 1936 following the death of Mansfield Forbes. In the same letter Leavis described the 'friendly relations' between them in the 1930s, and wrote of Quiller-Couch that 'It was only he who, after several defeats, finally got me a faculty post'.

tune with the ‘Young Turks’ who came after him; in fact it is possible to trace some intriguing points of contact between the two academic camps. To take one example: there was firm agreement amongst each of them about the necessity of teaching contemporary writing. As one would expect from a novelist, Quiller-Couch saw literature as a ‘living art’, and when negotiations were taking place regarding the new Tripos towards the end of the war, it was agreed that the study of English literature should be brought right up to the present day. Quiller-Couch therefore lectured on the poetry of Meredith and Hardy, while Richards gave an entire course on ‘The Contemporary Novel’ in the earliest days of the Tripos, in 1919. For Leavis too, literature offered contact with a community of values rooted in an organic, pre-industrial past, but it was also a living, continuing tradition, an ever-expanding canon. Cambridge English lecturers were thus markedly more progressive than their counterparts at Oxford, where novels were regarded with deep suspicion in the early years of the English School, and lectures on twentieth-century literature in general did not take place until 1970.

Quiller-Couch and his successors held very similar views on other topics, too: as has been well-documented, Richards and Leavis both identified a social and political utility to training the broader population to ‘read’ texts discriminately; continuous exposure to mass culture (in the form of newspapers, radio, advertising, the music hall), they believed, had blunted and obscured the ability to discern ‘meaning’ in language, resulting in emotion-driven ‘stock responses’, and leaving the public susceptible to propagandist manipulation. Quiller-Couch a decade earlier had offered a similar diagnosis, urging his readers to reject ‘the fifth-rate, the sham, the fraudulent’ by ‘train[ing] yourself to keep a look-out’ for those who use ‘Jargon’ – that is, ‘circumlocution rather than short straight speech’, and ‘vague woolly abstract nouns rather than concrete ones’. He quoted numerous examples of ‘sham prose’ taken from journalists and the press, and advised turning to Shakespeare for a more ‘honest’ language marked by use of the ‘concrete word’, and the ‘definite, particular, visualised image’.²⁷ Quiller-Couch believed he could improve students’ own prose style by heightening their awareness of evasiveness in writing, and even highlighted certain tell-tale words and phrases.

²⁷ Implicit here is the suggestion that English vocabulary was preferable to ‘foreign’ words, particularly German; elsewhere in these lectures Quiller-Couch’s patriotism became much more acute, and a wave of wartime anti-German feeling around Cambridge more generally would ensure that philology, which was regarded as a Germanic discipline and at that time was being taught by German professors, had no place on the English Tripos, established in 1917.

This would also, he believed, serve a broader social purpose, alerting them to the ubiquitous presence of dishonest language more generally – whether in business, journalism, or politics.

One final example of academic antecedence is the influence of both Quiller-Couch and Leavis on the teaching of English in schools. Quiller-Couch was a passionate campaigner for the improvement of school education before and during his time at Cambridge. The 1902 Education Act legislated that county councils, as ‘Local Education Authorities’, had the power to establish new secondary schools in their area, and Quiller-Couch, a member of the Cornwall Education Committee from 1904 onwards, used these provisions to build a string of secondary schools throughout the county. In his preface to *On the Art of Reading* he confirmed his commitment to school-level education, particularly as it related to English, declaring that ‘*The real battle for English lies in our Elementary Schools, and in the training of our Elementary Teachers*. It is there that the foundations of a sound national teaching in English will have to be laid, as it is there that a wrong trend will lead to incurable issues’. As might be expected, given his interest in teaching methods, two of the lectures in *On the Art of Reading* were set aside for discussion of classroom reading. He argued that encouraging a child to read silently, on their own, was of far greater benefit than the more widespread method of reciting passages in unison as a class; reading quietly allowed the child to have a more intimate relationship with the book, and to feel as though they were being spoken to directly by the author. Quiller-Couch also expressed concern that by taking the chair at Cambridge he had unduly neglected school provisions, where curriculum reform along these lines was urgently needed: ‘My thoughts have too strayed from my audience in a University theatre away to remote rural class-rooms where the hungry sheep look up and are not fed; to piteous groups of urchins standing at attention and chanting *The Wreck of the Hesperus* in unison’. In these lectures Quiller-Couch asked that teachers read aloud to their classes, choosing passages that would provoke in pupils a sense of wonder regardless of whether they understood the full meaning; provided the teacher could read eloquently, the child would be carried along by the rhythm and captivated by the language, spurring a lifelong fascination with literature.²⁸ Later in the same volume Quiller-Couch restated that ‘the Humanities

²⁸ This foreshadowed sentiments expressed in the 1921 Newbolt Report (to which Quiller-Couch contributed), which was commissioned by the Board of Education to enquire into the state of English teaching in England at all educational levels. The committee criticised the practice of reading aloud in schools as ‘purely mechanical’, therefore ‘apt to lead to a stilted and artificial delivery’. One headmistress commented that ‘Children should, from the beginning, realise that the writing is speaking to them silently’. The Report also insisted that ‘the teacher should be a good reader himself’, because ‘Above all, he should be able to read poetry so as to reveal its beauty and to awaken poetic emotion’.

should not be treated as a mere crown and ornament of education ... they should inform every part of it, from the beginning, in every school of the realm' so that 'our pupil will, by an inner guide, be warned to choose the better and reject the worse when we turn him loose to read for himself'.²⁹ Leavis, working along similar lines, believed that the crusade for English literature had to be carried into the school classroom. Literature for Leavis was "life", a wholesome moral force, and the spiritual health of the nation rested on the transmission of cultural intelligence through the work of specialist critics. He encouraged his students to see themselves as a first line of defence against the current degradation of industrial society, and many of his graduates responded to this proselytising fervour by choosing teaching as a career, 'entering schools to teach English as he had taught them',³⁰ and thereby disseminating his principles to many thousands of pupils – and in some cases, also at the level of government policy.³¹

Quiller-Couch tends to be sidelined in most narratives of Cambridge English as an enthusiastic amateur who was guided above all by personal taste. More recent developments seem to locate him at an even further remove: the introduction of managerial values into every aspect of university teaching and administration naturally encourages us to look on him rather wistfully as the emblem of an age before 'research outputs', 'impact', and 'publication portfolio' were established as academic watchwords, compulsory measures of scholarly worth and public accountability. Yet with the latest REF cycle completed and the next submission deadline several years away, now might be a good time to reflect a little more closely on the present state of the subject, particularly the current imbalance between teaching and research. What is undeniable about Quiller-Couch and the generation that followed him, particularly, of course, Leavis, is their strong commitment to teaching. David Ellis recently described Leavis as an 'indulgent teacher' who was remarkably generous with his time – three classes a week for each year group was the norm.³² Quiller-Couch inspired similar levels of devotion among his students, as this article has shown. Tillyard has also written that when Quiller-Couch was 'at his best as a lecturer, no one complained that he did

²⁹ Shades of Matthew Arnold's ethos are discernible here, most obviously his definition of 'culture' as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world'. More generally Quiller-Couch's rather lofty description of literature as offering solace and spiritual enlightenment owes a great deal to Arnold's conception of its broader moral and social function.

³⁰ Margaret Mathieson, *The Preachers of Culture*, George Allen & Unwin (London 1975), p. 122.

³¹ Mathieson has listed just some of Leavis's former students who went on to take up influential positions in the field; these include Denys Thompson, Boris Ford, G. H. Bantock, Frank Whitehead, and David Holbrook.

³² David Ellis, *Memoirs of a Leavisite: The Decline and Fall of Cambridge English*, Liverpool University Press (Liverpool 2013), p. 22.

not research as well as lecture'.³³ Nowadays more publications equal more government funding, and Tillyard's statement feels quaintly naïve. Ellis was teaching at the University of Kent when the RAE was first introduced in 1986 and he recalls the drastic impact of this sudden pressure to publish, with contact hours decreasing from 12 to 6 in order to free up more time for research. If Quiller-Couch's approach to academia does indeed feel like the relic of a very different age, then we might say that the fault lies not with him, but with the current system.

³³ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Muse Unchained*, Bowes & Bowes (London 1958), p. 66.