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AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY CRITICISM

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Preface

Much of this Handbook is devoted to surveying the history of literary criticism and chronicling the fortunes of certain texts in that history. These are not offered as something cut-and-dried, to be learned by rote. To know where ideas about literature originated should free us to re-think those ideas for ourselves, and go beyond them; a sense that even the most profound concepts and deeply-felt opinions were in large part shaped by the era that produced them should free us to formulate new concepts and opinions. It is appropriate, therefore, that our advice to those just starting out on the practice of literary criticism should begin with a consideration of what Plato, Aristotle and all their most illustrious successors have written on the subject.

of the Roses for most of the fifteenth century; then, when the arts seemed to be reviving at the Court of Henry VIII, it was thrown into confusion again by the Reformation. Only when a political and religious settlement was secured under Elizabeth I was culture, and literature in particular, able to flourish. Mid-way through her reign, England's literary Renaissance found its perfect spokesman in Sir Philip Sidney.

Sir Philip Sidney

1554–1586

Sidney's critical treatise was written about 1580 but not published until 1595, after his death, when two separate editions were published under different titles, *An Apology for Poetry* and *The Defence of Poesy*. The former title is used in this Handbook. The *Apology* (meaning 'explanation' rather than 'excuse') is scarcely original in anything it says (most of the key ideas are taken from Plato, Aristotle and Horace) but owes its significance to its timing, its spirited style and to the fact that it was written by Sidney. When he wrote it, Sidney was nephew and heir presumptive to the most powerful man in the kingdom, the Earl of Leicester; he was looked to as an ideal embodiment of the Renaissance spirit: courtier, soldier and poet.

It is said that he wrote the *Apology* in response to a work which had been dedicated to him, attacking poetry and plays; the author of this book, Stephen Gosson (1554–1624), was supposedly misled by Sidney's staunchly Protestant and anti-Catholic political associations into believing that he would be sympathetic to Puritan-style attacks on poetry as a frivolous and dangerous distraction. The story may not be true, but if it is, Gosson seriously miscalculated. Sidney puts forward one of the most enthusiastic arguments for poetry ever penned, censuring only its abuse, and giving some suggestions as to how poetry, including drama, may be improved in England: this only a few years before the great works of Spenser (whom he knew), Marlowe, Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson and all the other Elizabethan writers.*

'Poesy', says Sidney, 'is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight.' (The latter formula, of course, derives from Horace rather than Aristotle.) But poetry does not offer a *literal* description of reality (which is why it does not tell lies, as some claim; it does not assert untruths as truths); it offers rather a heightened version of reality: 'Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers

*Edmund Spenser (?1552–99), author of *The Faerie Queene* (1596); Christopher Marlowe (1564–93), poet and dramatist, author of *Doctor Faustus*; William Shakespeare (1564–1616), greatest of English poets and dramatists; John Donne (1572–1631), poet and Dean of St Paul's, whose *Songs and Sonets* are discussed in Part 3.

In short, it is not an Augustan poem; Johnson is aware that it has qualities of greatness which do not fall within his own definitions of what matters in poetry but, rather than explore these, he seems to be determined to cut this 'surly republican' down to size.

Such criticism – a calculated attack on a major author – can be exhilarating to read; but it is a dangerous example to imitate. The lesson to derive from Johnson's comments on Milton is that Milton *mattered* to Johnson, both as a thinker and as a poet, and this is why his criticism is so engaged, albeit so negative. Johnson is measuring his own standards and principles against those of a man he respects but with whom he is not in sympathy; such criticism is not to be undertaken lightly. He is generally a better model when assessing Dryden and Pope, two poets who in different ways come closest to his ideal; the comparison of the two, in the *Life of Pope*, is particularly illuminating and suggestive:

Dryden knew more of man in his general nature, and Pope in his local manners. The notions of Dryden were formed by comprehensive speculation, and those of Pope by minute attention It is not to be inferred of this poetical vigour Pope had only a little, because Dryden had more; for every other writer since Milton must give place to Pope; and even of Dryden it must be said, that, if he has brighter paragraphs, he has not better poems If the flights of Dryden are therefore higher, Pope continues longer on the wing. If of Dryden's fire the blaze is brighter, of Pope's the heat is more regular and constant. Dryden often surpasses expectation, and Pope never falls below it. Dryden is read with frequent astonishment, and Pope with perpetual delight.

The acute powers of discrimination demonstrated here, between two poets who – to a superficial modern reading – often seem very similar, cannot be ignored, though of course we are by no means obliged to subscribe to the value-judgements which go with them.

Although Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* may be said to have established literary biography as the most popular medium of criticism in England, they cannot be said to have established a model form which others were to follow. Later writers were to blur the distinctions between biography, character and appreciation of the works in a variety of ways, producing results which are only marginally related to the concerns of literary criticism as we have defined them. In the case of some writers – notably those who died young and dramatically, like Marlowe, Keats, Byron and some First World War poets – the biographical approach can prove particularly suspect, colouring the whole process of understanding and appreciating what they actually wrote.

The fact is that there are myriad ways in which the life and times of an author can be brought to bear on an understanding of his writing – so

World War, and he summed it up in the idea of a 'face somewhere behind the page':

It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry* – in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls.

This was an attempt to lay the ghost of Dickens as primarily the author of *Pickwick* and *A Christmas Carol*, to insist that, *despite his popularity*, he should still be taken seriously by intelligent people. One consequence of the insistence on the novel as an art form, largely instigated by Henry James and followed by critics like Forster, was that popularity became a suspect criterion: how could something be great art if it was also widely accessible? Orwell tries to counter this by insisting that the spirit and content of Dickens's novels matter more than their artistic 'form'. It was indicative of the climate of opinion that Orwell was protesting about, that there was no place for Dickens (except, rather oddly, for *Hard Times*) in F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948).

The second of the two long essays, and in many ways the more influential, was Edmund Wilson's 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', published in *The Wound and The Bow* (1941). Wilson too starts from the assertion that Dickens 'has become for the English middle class so much one of the articles of their creed – a familiar joke, a favourite dish, a Christmas ritual – that it is difficult for British pundits to see in him the great artist and social critic that he was'. He sets out to counter this by stressing the element of social criticism in Dickens's novels and by emphasising the psychological gloom they so often reflect; the latter point in particular causes him to accord unusual prominence to the later novels, from *Bleak House* (1852–3) onwards. These are, for Wilson, and for virtually all the critics who follow him, the richest and most rewarding of Dickens's achievements; and *Great Expectations* emerges as a pivotal work:

In *Great Expectations* we see Pip pass through a whole psychological cycle. At first, he is sympathetic, then by a more or less natural process he turns into something unsympathetic, then he becomes sympathetic again. Here the effects of both poverty and riches are seen from the inside in one person. This is for Dickens a great advance

Among the criticism of *Great Expectations* which may be said to follow directly from Wilson's essay are Dorothy Van Ghent's 'On *Great Expectations*' in *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953); G. R. Strange's 'Expectations Well Lost: Dickens' Fable for his Time' (*College English*, xvi, October 1954); and Julian Moynahan's 'The