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The Critic in Pieces: The Theory and Practice of Literary Reviewing

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Far be it from us to disparage our own craft, whereby we have our living! Only we must note these things: that Reviewing spreads with strange vigour; that such a man as Byron reckons the reviewer and the poet equal; that at the last Leipzig Fair, there was advertised a Review of Reviews. By and by it will be found that all Literature has become one boundless self-devouring Review ...

Thomas Carlyle, *The Edinburgh Review*, 1831.

The reviewing of bad books, W.H. Auden once remarked, is bad for one's character. What might easily be more damaging to the moral well-being of all those concerned with the literary world is the writing of bad reviews, whether of good or bad books. The practice of reviewing has developed in close tandem with the enormous growth of the book trade over the past few centuries and, almost from the very inception of this early critical subgenre, reports of irresponsibilities and futilities have been recurrent and widespread. In addressing undeniable malpractice in the area, the lack of homogeneity is a problem. Reviewing is not, and, except in its very early stages, has never been a uniform activity. Various organs that carry reviews, from literary periodicals, to academic journals, to newspapers, to the currently ubiquitous local magazine, are all aimed at different readerships and thus generalisations, both in terms of analysis and prescription, should be cautiously offered. Extensive work remains to be done on the history and current state of reviewing in all its varieties, particularly so in Ireland. While Irish periodical literature, like that elsewhere, has lately been gaining studentship, the reviewers involved are generally not accorded the importance of the main essayists. This is an endemic matter of demotion: Almost all serious periodicals are launched with editorials, but these rarely include any indication of reviewing policy, the presumption being that the critics in the back pages are engaged in secondary activity. Similarly with newspaper reviewers: Academics often like to distinguish between scholarly work and 'mere journalism', though they are, simultaneously, not usually averse to employing the reviews from archival newspapers as source material.

The primary aim of this essay is simply to assert the importance of reviewing generally and, concomitantly, to encourage a professional selfconsciousness in this

amorphous area by way, firstly, of a brief survey of the origins and development of the practice and, secondly, by some summary comments on the contemporary situation. I am principally concerned with literary reviewing. While reviewing, at its origins, was introduced in Western culture specifically as a method of communicating the contents of new scholarly publications to other scholars, the practice escalated alongside the expansion of popular literary forms, most notably the novel, and one of the chief complaints of professional reviewers and external commentators alike has been that the imperative of keeping pace with this pandemic genre is responsible for a decline in standards. Certain recommendations for the reviewing of literature can also be applied to the reviewing of scholarly or academic books, but there are also divergent considerations. The exigencies of factuality and accuracy in scholarly publications have in fact encouraged a degree of self-invigilation in reviewers and review organs involved in the area that far surpasses the conscientiousness of those in the literary area. Without wanting to provoke again the ‘two cultures’ debate, it should be said that while reviews in the humanities are the kind read by the vast majority of people, it is the scientific fields that have more consistently provided a developing theory of reviewing practice.¹

Until quite recently, prescriptive critiques of this subject have largely been ad hoc, scarce and brief, at least in comparison to the attentions directed at other varieties of literary activity. Some well-intentioned and suggestive analyses have nevertheless been offered. Reference to some of these will allow for a discussion of reviewing as an individual variety of literary criticism and will point up certain continuities in the main issues.

Extensive empirical work has been done on the historical rise and function of literary journals, magazines and newspapers and some basic trends and attitudes in the reviewing policies and practices of these organs can easily be traced.² The variety of book reviewing that emerged in the periodicals of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had largely professional purposes (the first periodical devoted to

¹ For a concise overview of developments in reviewing generally, see A.J. Walford’s bibliographical essay, ‘The Art of Reviewing’, in Walford, ed., *Reviews and Reviewing: A Guide* (London: Mansell, 1986) 5-18. Walford’s volume is especially useful in that it is divided into specialist areas: Literature and language, history, social sciences, etc.

² See, for instance, Frank Donoghue, *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996); Derek Roper, *Reviewing Before the Edinburgh, 1788-1802* (London: Methuen, 1978); and Peter F. Morgan, *Literary Critics and Reviewers in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Croom

the advertisement of new books was the *Journal des Savants*, Paris 1665). Straightforward book notices, summaries and abstracts were provided for scholars in such organs as LaRoche's *Memoirs of Literature* (1710-14), though with a follow-up journal, *New Memoirs of Literature*, synopses of new books began to include some slight evaluative remarks. The enduring assumption, however, was that the proper function of the review was to provide readers with some direct information on the contents of publications rather than with extensive contextualisations or critical opinion of any sort. While occasional commentary, principally by way of biographical information, was offered by *The Literary Magazine* (1756-58) for instance, an editorial asserted that the reviewer's role was 'to give a faithful account of books which come into his hands. ... When he affects the air and language of a censor or judge, he invades the undoubted right of the public, which is the only sovereign judge of the reputation of an author, and the merit of his compositions'.³

New and less determinedly objective editorial policies quickly emerged however, and the influence of reviewers increased with the rise of more argumentative and longer lasting journals like *The Monthly Review* (1749-1845) and *The Critical Review* (1756-90). Also, reviewing issues were complicated by the move of various organs toward the inclusion of reviews of literature as well as of learned publications. While partisanship, though damaging in itself, tended to be quite blatant and thus resistible, a range of other, more discreet predispositions were likely to emerge when the book at hand demanded that a reviewer demonstrate good aesthetic taste rather than simple knowledge or a capacity to summarise. As publishers's output increased rapidly, the basic problem of selection, and the attendant accusations of selectivity, were also bound to arise. The rise of the principal popular form, the novel, was hugely implicated in this (the first journal to consistently review popular literature was *The Compendious Library*, a bi-monthly printed in Dublin, 1751-52). One reviewer for *The Monthly Review* complained eventually in 1788: 'The Reviewer of the modern novel is in the situation of Hercules encountering the Hydra—One head lopped off, two or three immediately spring up in its place'.⁴

Helm, 1983). See also, R.P. McCutcheon, 'The Beginning of Book Reviewing in English Periodicals', *Proceedings of the MLA* 37 (Dec. 1922): 691-706.

³ Quoted in Walter Graham, *English Literary Periodicals* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1930) 204-5.

⁴ Quoted in J.M.S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England: 1770-1800* (London: Constable & Co., 1932) 15.

Exponential increase in reviewing output compounded the problems review organs already had with encouraging some kind of patterned style and approach amongst their contributors. The general critical consensus is that until the appearance of *The Edinburgh Review* (1802-1929) and *The Quarterly Review* (1809-1967) reviewing had steadily fallen into a poor and scandalised state, with appreciable accusations being made of undue influence from publishers and various interested parties. John O. Hayden, before developing his thesis that the early nineteenth century was the 'heyday of periodical reviewing', asserts simply that 'At the beginning of the nineteenth century the state of periodical reviewing left something to be desired'.⁵ With these two organs, and also with *Blackwood's Magazine* (1817-1980), assiduous editorial efforts were made to assert a new professionalism and to distinguish between serious reviews and those written for the increasingly popular and more loosely organised culture and society magazines (between 1802 and 1824 there were more than sixty organs carrying reviews in England). Though 'high' reviews often veered away from the books involved and lapsed into aggressive personal attacks on authors and reviewers from rival journals, a significant innovation was the reformulation of the plain review as a vehicle for longer essays and articles. One period of reviewing practice essentially terminated at this point, replaced by the reviewing experience with which we are largely familiar today. Covering the last two centuries in one of the standard works on the area of literary journalism, John Gross argues that 'it was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the review emerged as a really powerful institution, a major social force'.⁶

This was a time of intensified self-awareness in literary criticism. In and around the Romantic period, reviews, particularly those written in the longer form, functioned much in the way that academic criticism does today and they performed vitally in the popularisation of Romantic poetry and fiction. Arguing this point, R.G. Cox affirms that the best work of the early critical journalists showed 'a sense of responsibility, a consciousness of performing a necessary and valuable function, a concern for the maintenance of the highest standards of thought and feeling'. From Cox's perspective in the Thirties, it seemed that this consciousness was 'completely

⁵ *The Romantic Reviewers, 1802-1824* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) 1, 7.

⁶ Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: English Literary Life Since 1800* (1969; Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1991) 12, 11.

lacking in modern reviewing', and he provides, in contrast, quite a paean to earlier exemplars:

The Reviews made mistakes, they allowed themselves to be influenced on occasion by political and social feeling, they expressed themselves impolitely and sometimes brutally. On the other hand their prejudices, like those of Johnson, are obvious, and it is easy to make allowance for them: at the same time their offences, which have been greatly exaggerated by a more sentimentally genteel race of critics, are seen on examination to be very small in comparison with their solid merits of seriousness and critical conscientiousness. They never doubted that literature deserved the serious concern of the adult intelligence, and that it was their business to maintain standards of taste which had behind them the consensus of educated opinion. They consistently refused to pretend that excellence was 'common and abundant', and with their extraordinary influence and authority, they played the major part in creating for the writers of their age that informed, intelligent, and critical public without which no literature can survive for very long, and which is so conspicuously lacking to-day.⁷

Cox's nostalgia for the great period of high journalism, as will be emphasised in a moment, is symptomatic of his own time. For the purposes of balance it is more immediately worthwhile to quote Coleridge in a complaint which has significance far beyond that of the creative artist's perennial rejection of negative public criticism:

But till reviews are conducted on far other principles, and with far other motives; till in the place of arbitrary dictation and petulant sneers, the reviewers support their decisions by reference to fixed canons of criticism, previously established and deduced from the nature of man; reflecting minds will pronounce it arrogance in them thus to announce themselves to men of letters, as the guides of their taste and judgement. To the purchaser and mere reader it is, at all events, an injustice. He who tells me that there are *defects* in a new

⁷ 'The History of Critical Journalism' (1937), *A Selection from Scrutiny*, vol. 2, ed. F.R. Leavis (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968) 255, 271. See, also, Cox's essay, 'The Reviews and Magazines', *The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Volume 6: From Dickens to Hardy*, ed. Boris Ford (1958; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 188-204.

work, tells me nothing which I should not have taken for granted without his information. But he, who points out and elucidates the *beauties* of an original work, does indeed give me interesting information⁸

Ostensibly negative as this remonstrance against the early nineteenth-century reviewer is, its legislative thrust is immensely positive. Coleridge's central position in the development and promotion of modern criticism needs no reiteration; suffice it so deduce from even this single passage a new performative role for the reviewer where deference to 'principles' and 'canons of criticism' will replace earlier laxness. The point is resonant given today's rigid professional categorisations: the reviewer *is* a critic.

Though a complete rethinking of the principles of literary criticism would have to await the twentieth century, the status of reviewing rose steadily in the nineteenth century and, in a complete reversal of the earliest policy of giving the book under review absolute primacy, the phenomenon of the reviewer as personality emerged.⁹ While this period is widely regarded as one of 'Heroes and Men of Letters', as John Gross puts it, an increased selfconsciousness of their own practices developed amongst reviewers relatively early in the twentieth century and the nineteenth century was perceived to have brought about a gradual decline in standards. The degree to which editorial policies towards the function of reviewing had changed for the worse since the original abstract or synoptic type of review, was indicated by Robert Lynd, literary editor of *The Daily News* from 1913, in his essay 'Book Reviewing' (1920) where he pointed up the depreciation of the quotational review. Some newspapers, he revealed, had actually developed a policy of refusing payment to contributors for space taken up by material directly extracted from the books under consideration.¹⁰

One of the most thoughtful and vehement pieces on this degeneration is Virginia Woolf's essay 'Reviewing' (1939). Woolf regarded the late nineteenth century in particular as the period of a simultaneous explosion and implosion:

⁸ *Biographia Literaria or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (1817; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) vol. 1, 62.

⁹ See Gross, 37-110.

¹⁰ *The Art of Letters* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920) 228-240.

... not only did the reviews become shorter and quicker, but they increased immeasurably in number. The result of these three tendencies was of the highest importance. It was catastrophic indeed; between them they have brought about the decline and fall of reviewing ... the value of reviews for all parties has dwindled until—is it too much to say until it has disappeared? ... reviewing as practised at present has failed in all its objects.

With an echo of Coleridge's 'fixed canons of criticism' and in testament to Lynd's view that the personality of the reviewer had replaced the imperative of quoting from books, Woolf decided that the review had become 'an expression of individual opinion, given without any attempt to refer to "eternal standards" by a man who is in a hurry; who is pressed for space; who is expected to cater in that little space for many different interests; who is bothered by the knowledge that he is not fulfilling his task; who is doubtful what that task is; and who, finally, is forced to hedge'.¹¹ Woolf's concern with the practical pressures on even the well-motivated reviewer culminated in her only half-humorous suggestion of a scheme whereby, in analogy with the medical profession, the reviewer would abolish himself and set up as a kind of literary private practitioner. He would meet the writer at first hand at a clinic and amiable, critical, and, above all, confidential relations would be established which would allow the writer to take treatment without any damage to his public reputation.

Cox's belletristic nostalgia, Lynd's disillusionment as an editor and Woolf's desperation as a reviewer, however negatively expressed, are all indicative of a developing awareness in and around their time of the importance of standards in the review pages. As evinced by the significant occasion of the appearance of the *Times Literary Supplement*, first with *The Times* from 1902, then independently from 1914, it was obvious that the reviewer would continue to perform an important function in the circulation of books, at least amongst the educated middle classes. As ideas of the proper operation of literary criticism began to be redefined in the universities, more extended and more careful opinions were expressed on related concerns in the practice of book reviewing, particularly in Britain and America. While important books on the area were published by Frank Swinnerton and Helen E. Haines,

¹¹ *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life, Selected Essays, Volume Two* (London: Penguin, 1993), 154-6, 157. Woolf's essay is arguably the most important in the history of reviewing. It was intended very much as a broadside and was published separately by the Hogarth Press.

legislative studies began to take a more theoretical turn with the appearance of a precisely focused essay by A.B Baird in the early Fifties.¹²

Thereafter, though often out of the common purview of literary academics, there appeared a number of articles and books aimed at regulating reviewing approaches and styles. While many were concerned with general practice, the evolving classifications of journalistic and academic reviewing were also reflected.¹³ Though university people have played an increasing role in reviewing for literary broadsheets and newspapers over the past couple of decades, academics have not tended to be overly selfconscious of the practice.¹⁴ Currently, the more helpful and conscientious studies issue, perhaps inevitably, from full-time literary editors and journalists. Many of these engage heavily in anecdotal reminiscence but nevertheless provide useful background information and practical insights into a brand of criticism many areas of which are obscure to outsider practitioners.¹⁵ While such books concentrate on the machinations of individual reviewers and of particular review pages, some variably useful legislative handbooks, guides and primers have also been published by journalists and journalism theorists, and it is these that can perhaps best provide guidance for potential reviewers, both academic and non-academic. The underlying point behind all of these publications is that the short review, the review article, the long review essay, can all, like any other kind of critical writing, be isolated and theorised in a formal or structural fashion.

Along with uniformly providing basic recommendations on such matters as the levels of research, structuration and cogency necessary for a high standard of reviewing, these advisory books tend to provide oppositional emphases on the

¹² See Swinnerton, *Authors and the Book Trade*, 2nd. ed. (London: Gerald Howe, 1933), and *The Reviewing and Criticism of Books* (New York: Oxford UP, 1939); and Helen E. Haines, *Living with Books: The Art of Book Selection*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 1950). See Baird, 'What We Expect of a Review', *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 37 (1951) 81-6.

¹³ For general studies, see John Drewry, *Writing Book Reviews* (Boston: The Writer Inc., 1966); Julie A. Virgo, 'The Review Article: Its Characteristics and Problems', *The Literary Quarterly* 41:4 (Oct. 1971) 275-91; Sylvia E. Kammerman, ed., *Book Reviewing: A Guide to Writing Book Reviews for Newspapers, Magazines, Radio and Television, by Leading Book Editors, Critics and Reviewers* (Boston: The Writer Inc., 1978). For studies on the academic area, see the journal *Scholarly Publishing*, especially R.S. Wolper, 'A Grass Blade: On Academic Reviewing' [10:4 (July 1979) 325-8]; Bruce D. Macphail, 'Book Reviews and the Scholarly Publisher' [12:1 (Oct. 1980) 53-63]; John Budd, 'Book Reviewing Practices of Journals in the Humanities' [13:4 (July 1982) 363-71]; and Wolper, 'On Academic Reviewing: Ten Common Errors' [16:3 (Apr. 1985) 269-75].

¹⁴ For one recent exception however, see Ylva Lindholm-Romantschuk, *Scholarly Book Reviewing in the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Karl Miller, *Dark Horses: An Experience of Literary Journalism* (London: Picador, 1998); and Anthony Curtis, *Lit Ed: On Reviewing and Reviewers* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998).

requisite ideology or function of a good reviewer. One of the more popular handbooks on journalism, MacDougall and Reid's *Interpretative Reporting*, includes a considerable section on reviewing and the authors are quite definite in encouraging adherence to a direct method: 'The greatest service the newspaper that gives space to artistic news can perform for both artists and spectators or auditors', they conclude, 'is to interpret the former to the latter'.¹⁶ The advice is that the judgement of a work should very often be postponed in favour of direct mediation for the reader. On the other hand, Richard Keeble, in a section on 'The Art of Reviewing' in his guidebook for journalists, provides a different nuance and argues that a review, along with interpreting or critiquing work, should also be self-contained and distinctly stylised: 'The review must then exist as a piece of writing in its own right. It must entice in the reader through the quality and colour of its prose. It must entertain'.¹⁷

Deferential as the first view here is to the traditional notion that criticism is absolutely secondary to the primary work at hand, there seems little point in passing over the fact that, in the face of the increasingly insurmountable issue of books, readers resort coequally to the advice of reviewers. From the very beginnings of reviewing practice, review organs have vied with each other for popularity and credibility and no single reviewer can have an edge if all engage in simple interpretation. Cognisant as the second view is of the necessity for a review to entertain as well as merely interpret if it is to attract readership, there also seems little benefit in allowing the style of a review to distract that readership away from the book at hand. A standard method of the advisory books on reviewing is to provide a listing of prerequisites for the writing of good reviews.¹⁸ Mindful of the various issues glanced over above, I would like to offer a few summary points and recommendations of my own that might tread the middle ground between the views of reviewing as self-effacing mediation and as artful entertainment.

Many reviews continue to be almost indistinguishable from publishers's advertisements or press releases, consisting mainly of a long list of superlatives or, as

¹⁶ Curtis D. MacDougall and Robert D. Reid, *Interpretative Reporting*, 9th. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 496.

¹⁷ Richard Keeble, *The Newspaper Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994) 301.

¹⁸ One of the more balanced listings of this kind is Brendan Hennessy's in his *Writing Feature Articles: A Practical Guide to Methods and Markets*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Focal Press, 1993). His five prerequisites, in brief, are: the indication of the kind of work under review and what it is about; the provision of informed judgement; provision of evidence for opinions and use of persuasive language; to act as a simple bridge between art practitioner and audience; to set standards while also being readable and entertaining.

Lynd put it, of ‘a thoughtless scattering of acceptable words’. Unqualified praise is naturally deserved by some books, but clichéd praise is only a step away from condescension. There should, in particular, be an interdict on the phrase ‘*tour de force*’. Indiscriminate praise is perhaps the easiest resort for the busy reviewer but it should be remembered that literary worth is absolutely relative: if everything is good, then nothing is good. The most discreditable variety of approval issues from the friends of an author under review. The danger of this is especially acute in a small literary community like Ireland’s where vigilance is all the more difficult for literary editors. A rigid policy line should be held on this however: If a particular writer has engaged in a little backslapping for another, a return favour should never be courted. This happens regularly and is considerably responsible for the inferior status of reviewing as a critical subgenre.

While the matter of ‘what is it?’ should always be the first addressed by the reviewer, the claim to be able to identify the nature of a work presupposes a capacity to evaluate a work in terms of predecessors of the same ilk. ‘How is it?’ is a question that should never be avoided even if the answer must be in the negative. Writers of books are as entitled as anyone else to complain away in private about all and sundry and in particular about adverse reaction to their work in reviews, but, especially if they make complaint in public or in print, it may be worth while asking why reaction to single evaluative readings can often be so vehement. To get the philistinism out of the way first: If the writer fears primarily for potential damage to his purse, then he puts his work on a par with any other business and therefore can have no claim to the special treatment generally extended to the creative personality. The marketplace, as all publishers, or at least the conglomerates, are firmly aware, is an unforgiving and competitive arena and no quarter is given these days in the drive for publicity tours and promotions. Until publishers, at the behest of authors or otherwise, replace self-serving unctuous blurbs with advertisements more helpful and less condescending to the contemporary reader then business will remain business; in the meantime, reviewers can be unashamedly overdetermined in the interests of critical balance and can justifiably care little so long as they too are doing business.

The matter is naturally more complicated when a writer above all else fears that his public reputation may be damaged by a negative review. Writers are, traditionally in any case, society’s more sensitive creatures and might thus be expected to be

considerably damaged by oppositional opinion. Tennyson, famously, had intense reactions to disfavoured reviews and became so distracted by critical hostility that he even at one stage considered emigration. This, I suggest, is an occupational hazard and cannot be helped. If we leave aside for a moment our continued Romantic perception of the writer as a tender individual, a perception that is particularly obstinate in Ireland, it could be supposed that the publication of a creative work is a supreme act of egotistical risk. The ego can only look to itself, and, in a phrase of Chekhov's that John McGahern likes to quote, once a writer has published all he can do with any good grace is to bow. And if he expects, as Coleridge did, that only the 'beauties' of his work be identified, then he may well ask himself if his ego should be on stage in the first place.

There remains the matter of the writer feeling, aside from the incontrovertibility of subjective reviewing assessment, that he is simply being publicly misunderstood in his intentions. Indifference to reviews in a writer can hardly be condemned; but if he does care to respond to a review then the invitation to do so should be a matter of course. The provision of a kind of letters *feuilleton*, as in the popular literary journals, would thus be a welcome addition to those newspapers that engage heavily in reviewing, or at least in 'high' reviewing. If reviewers wrote in the knowledge that the subjects of their quick assessments, or, indeed other invigilators, might instantly respond, they would surely be more assiduous in their efforts.

In the context of the rapidly expanding area of academic and scholarly criticism, the review, it might be supposed, can hardly be expected to return to the critical status it once enjoyed. A large section of the reading public however, experiences criticism primarily through review organs and it is a disservice to this readership to assume that critical style and general prose style are minor considerations for the reviewer. Evidence of this assumption is widespread, from reviews of novels that engage almost exclusively in plot summary to reviews of poetry whose primary aim appears to steer as far clear as possible of accessibility of style. If reviewing is to maintain credibility and perform precisely as criticism, then its practitioners should be stylistically conscientious. In effect, the review pages can be the repository of a familiar style displaced and too casually demeaned by the rise of theoretical criticism. While the rigours of university literary studies usually demand a high awareness of modern theoretical developments, an awareness that is often overdetermined in academic

publications, the journalistic review is somewhat more amenable to varieties of practical criticism. A medial readership demands a general relaxation of the monotypic, thesis-driven approach in favour of a combinative mode that provides for the equal use of empirical discussion and anecdotal entertainment. Philip Larkin's prescription when introducing his own occasional pieces should be considered lapidary by those intent on any kind of reviewing: 'A good reviewer combines the knowledge of the scholar with the judgement and cogency of the critic and the readability of the journalist'.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983) 11.